

ALFRED

JUNE 50¢

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# HITCHCOCK'S

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE



EW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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June 1967

Dear Reader:

Summer is upon us once again, and it strikes me as a persisting time for giving—daughters to bridegrooms who do not deserve them, presents to fathers who do, vacations to employees who—but here you may fill in the truth for yourself. Perhaps there is simply no off season for grants.

The mention of brides brings to mind a young woman who had the peculiar habit of losing to the undertaker. Once she married an explorer who lost his footing on a stepladder. Next she wed a skydiver who failed to see the pool was void. Then there was a stunt pilot who—but enough. Her present marriage should endure a while. She wed the insurance investigator.

As we prepare for the hot season, I include herein practical, literally cooling hints on telephone usage, gardening, lemonade mixing and midnight motoring, capped by a helpful lesson for cab drivers. There is, in addition, how-to information on conventioning, appliance repair, balky elevators, salesmanship and bricklaying. Interspersed are examples of how to meet a host of new friends, all determined to give their sinister best.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

**ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**

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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

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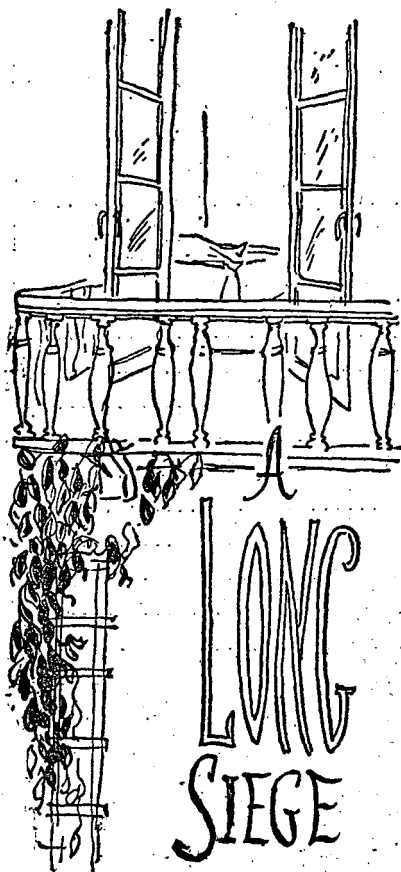
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*If it be true that, "Thought depends absolutely on the stomach," is it then incredible that bad digestion might stimulate black fancies?*



*by Max Van Derveer*

**H**ARRY STEAD struggled against the state of shock. Clarity of mind was very important to him now, just as it was twenty-five years ago, when he had dodged and darted like an animal through the hills of the Philippines with the pack of guerrillas. Awareness then was the thin edge between living another day to see Manuel's wide, white grin or dying against the point of a Japanese sword. Awareness now meant understanding and coping with questions and answers; but the goal was the same: to go on living.

But there was no keenness in Harry this warm, bright Sunday afternoon; only the numbness of finding his wife dead in her bed, the memory of a shambled room, the missing pearl ring—Manuel's pearl—that had been stripped from her finger, the cord of the extension telephone wrapped tightly around her neck, the receiver then replaced on its base, the contortion of her face, the open French doors to the second floor balcony off the bedroom . . .

Now there was only the vague



sensation of having a painful headache, cramps clutching spastically in his abdomen, Karl's voice as Karl answered the police captain's questions.

"... and when I saw the condition Harry was in," Karl went on hesitantly, "well, I took him home."

"What time was that, Mr. Flowers?"

"Oh, I'd say about nine-thirty. I remember looking at a wall clock when we left the bar. It was nine o'clock then and it is approximately a thirty minute drive from downtown to Harry's house."

"And in your opinion your brother had had—"

"Captain, Harry and I are not really brothers. That is, there is no blood relation. My mother died in childbirth and my father married Harry's mother, who was a widow, the following year. Harry was twenty years old then and went off to the Army. We really didn't even get to know each other until the late forties. You see, I'm twenty-eight and Harry is forty-seven."

"All right, Mr. Flowers, I see the family background. Now, in your opinion, Harry had too much to drink last night and you took him to his home."

"That is correct, Captain."

"Was his wife there?"

"I . . . really don't know."

Karl's answer penetrated the shock and Harry flinched.

"Were there lights in the house?"

"Yes." Karl sat fixed, his narrow body bent forward slightly from the hips, a tiny muscle ticing in the hollow of his cheek. "Lynn could have been home, Captain," he said. "The downstairs lights were on in the house, but I didn't see her."

"Wouldn't the lights suggest she was there?"

"Yes, they would."

Karl, Harry wanted to say, *Lynn was there. We saw her in a front room window when we drove up to the house. I remember her standing there. She was looking out.* But perhaps Karl hadn't noticed Lynn in the window—or perhaps she really hadn't been in the window. Perhaps it had only been his imagination, his fogged condition of mind. Perhaps Karl was relating the truth. After all, he had no reason to lie.

"All right," said the captain. "At the house—"

"I put Harry to bed in his den," Karl interrupted. "I waited until he went to sleep, found a blanket, put it over him, then left. I didn't see or hear Lynn, and I went home. Then this afternoon Harry called."

"Mr. Stead?"

Harry jerked at Captain Camp-

er's summons and focused his eyes on the man sitting in the swivel chair behind the desk, a man who was neat in dress and probably had been a police officer most of his life. He had very blue eyes and they were steady as he asked, "Do you concur with what Mr. Flowers has told me?"

Harry shrugged helplessly. "I—I didn't know she had a lover," he said and was surprised he could say anything.

"We can discuss that later, Mr. Stead," said the captain. "Do you concur with your bro . . . Mr. Flowers' account of last night?"

"I remember leaving the bar. I remember getting into Karl's car. After that I'm not sure. Everything is very hazy."

"Mr. Flowers," the captain said, "thank you for coming in."

"Are you going to hold Harry?" Karl asked.

"I want to hear his story, yes."

"Can I wait?"

"Certainly, but it will be a while before we are finished."

"I see. Well, perhaps, I should . . ." Karl hesitated. "Harry, maybe I'll go home—Barbara, the kids. You understand. Barbara will be out of her mind . . . wanting to know."

"Sure, Karl."

"You call when you're finished. Or take a cab. Come to the house.

Will you please do that, Harry?"

"I'll get a cab, Karl."

"Captain . . ." Karl fidgeted, shuffled. "Captain, there's probably something you should understand. Harry and I, well, we're sorta close. But Lynn, Harry's wife, and I didn't always see eye to eye. That's the reason I didn't make an effort last night to find out if she was in the house. I figured I could put Harry to bed in the den and . . ." Karl stopped, shuffled some more. "Really, Captain, it wasn't anything serious. Just a clash of personalities, I guess. Harry's wife was one person. I'm another."

"I know how it works," said the captain. He shifted in the chair, reached out to a recording machine on his desk, snapped off a button. "Thanks for allowing the tape, Mr. Flowers."

Karl turned, hesitated, glanced at Harry, then left the office.

Harry watched the captain take the tape from the machine, put a new tape in place. His headache seemed more pronounced now, and the abdominal cramps were sharper, biting hard. He never should put alcohol into his system. Experience was a teacher, but would he ever learn?

The captain flipped on the tape recorder. "Harry Stead," he said, "do you voluntarily, without coercion . . ."

Harry had heard the routine with Karl; he imagined the district attorney's office demanded it.

"I do," he said when the captain had completed the routine question, and somehow he felt as if he were once again standing at the altar with Lynn.

"Now," said Captain Campër, "do you prefer I question you or would you rather just tell me the whole story in your own words?"

"Where do I begin?"

"How about with yesterday? How about starting with when you got out of bed Saturday morning, July 9, 1966."

The date, Harry realized cynically, was now recorded on the tape for use in court later—if necessary.

Saturday had been a brass-colored, still day, a beautiful day for golf, but there were the odds and ends of the week to complete at his downtown tax accountant office, and the prospect of a new client. Harry awoke a few minutes after nine o'clock with the feeling that it was to be a good day, that he would win the prospective client. He lay smiling at the ceiling of the bedroom while he smoked the day's first cigarette and listened to his wife's rhythmic breathing in the next bed, then he showered,

shaved and prepared himself an egg, toast and coffee.

Lynn entered the kitchen while he was pouring his second cup of coffee. She wore pajamas and a negligee that was gathered tight at the waist. Her hair was tousled, and there was a thick pout to her unpainted lips as she held a cup for him to fill.

"I've got another lousy backache," she complained, stretching like a cat before she sat opposite him at the table and took the half-smoked cigarette from his fingers. She inhaled deeply, coughed. "I tell you, Harry, if we don't get some new mattresses—"

It was his first indication that his initial impression of the day may have been wrong.

"You going to the office?" she asked.

"Yes. Mr. Dorsey is coming in. You remember I told you—"

"I get to keep the car."

"Certainly. It's Saturday."

"I have a million things to do."

"Don't forget to have the car gassed. The tank is almost empty."

"Isn't it every Saturday? Leave some money."

He was surprised. "Don't you have something left from what I gave you yesterday?"

"Dammit, Harry, I can't buy the world with forty dollars. There's groceries, the cleaners, the laundry,



the car. What else do you expect?"

Folding the newspaper, he took a ten dollar bill from his wallet and put it on the table. "Hold down where you can, Lynn. We've had a couple of lean weeks."

"Sure. Give me a cigarette." She took the newspaper, skim-read the first page and accepted the lighted cigarette without looking up. "What time will you be coming home this afternoon?" she asked as Harry started to leave the kitchen.

"My appointment with Dorsey is at two o'clock."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I don't know," he said flatly.

The city bus was late. He waited impatiently at the intersection stop. There was a deep-seated restlessness stirring inside him now. Absently he thumped a fist against a thigh. Maybe he should chuck the entire day and get drunk, then Lynn would really have reason to be quarrelsome.

The bus hissed to a stop in front of him and he got aboard. There was only one other passenger, an elderly woman. It reminded him again that this was Saturday, a bright day when a man should be on a golf course. The service station Karl Flowers was buying came into view, but Karl was not to be seen. Was he already on a green at the municipal course?

At his office, figures would not tally correctly. Harry kept coming up with the wrong tabulations on the tax returns. Frustrated, he put them away at noon, lunched, resisted the temptation of a bar, returned to his office and tackled the returns again. The lunch break had not helped. Then at two o'clock, his prospective client phoned.

Mr. Dorsey had decided against hiring a tax accountant at this time.

"I'd still like to talk to you, Mr. Dorsey," Harry said, attempting to keep the plea from his voice. "I'm sure we can work out a financial arrangement that will—"

"Sorry, Stead. I've made up my mind."

"Well . . . all right, Mr. Dorsey, but if you reconsider in the future—"

"I have your number."

Harry slammed the phone down. He had counted on Dorsey. The new account could have made it a decent year for him.

He sat back. He suddenly wanted that noon drink. Just the one. Something hard that would turn his day around. That was all he needed, just one good jolt. It would stop there.

He shuddered. He was lying to himself. He knew the drinking would not stop with one glass.

He returned to the papers before

him, but an hour later he conceded. He stuffed the returns into a desk drawer, then reached for the phone. Perhaps Lynn had not yet left the house. Perhaps her mood had improved, perhaps she would join him in the drink he needed, listen to him. With her at his side, it would be a cinch he would not order a second round.

The phone jangled. Karl Flowers said, "Harry . . . I have to see you."

The break in Karl's voice alerted Harry. Something was wrong. Had those returns he'd prepared for Karl early in the week bounced already? No, it was too soon to hear from the Internal Revenue people.

"What's the trouble?"

"I'm downtown, Harry. I can be there in ten minutes. I—I have to see you."

Karl was jumpy and looked downcast when he sat in the chair opposite Harry. He wore his station uniform. Nervously, he lit a cigarette. "You aren't going to like this, Harry," he said finally, "And maybe I shouldn't stick my nose in."

"Come on, Karl. Unload. Get it off your chest."

"Well, Lynn was in the station this afternoon. I mean, she stopped in for gas and—"

"Doesn't she every Saturday aft-

ernoon? She always stops in."

"Yeah, but the point is, Harry, today I had to make a service run. I mean, right after Lynn left the station, I got this call to come downtown. One of my customers had a battery conk out on him and was hung up near the Hotel Roy. Not *at* the hotel, you understand, but near enough so I had a clear view of the main entrance to the Roy."

"Get to the point, Karl."

"Well, I was putting in this new battery, see, and that's when I saw Lynn again."

Harry waited with a sense of foreboding.

"I recognized your car right away, of course, when I saw it roll into the curb in front of the hotel, but I couldn't figure why Lynn was parking in the hotel's loading zone. Then when I saw her get out of the car and a bellhop came from the hotel and drove her car away, I really got curious. Harry, maybe—"

"Go on, Karl," Harry said firmly.

"Dammit, Harry, I feel like I've got my neck stuck out ten miles!"

"Go on! You saw my wife get out of the car and . . ."

"A guy met her! On the sidewalk in front of the hotel! I couldn't believe my eyes. The guy came out of the hotel, they kissed, and then—"

"Kissed on the sidewalk? It had to be someone else, Karl! You're mistaken!"

"No, Harry." Karl was solemn when he shook his head. "It was Lynn, all right, but I've got a hunch now I shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have told you. You look like you're going to explode."

Harry's anger was a wild, red undercurrent, a raging river swollen all out of proportion by flood waters.

"What are you going to do, Harry? Where are you going?"

He hadn't realized he had left his desk. Now he stood with a hand on the knob of the street door, half turned, staring at Karl Flowers.

"I knew I shouldn't have," whined Karl, leaving the chair, "but Lynn meeting another man isn't fair to you, Harry, not after all these years you two have been married. Did I do wrong?"

"See you 'round, Karl."

"Don't, Harry. Don't do . . . whatever you got in mind. Maybe she isn't worth it. Maybe she—"

"And just what have I got in mind, Karl?"

"Well, you look like you could—"

"Kill her?"

"Maybe I should go along with you, huh? The kid is at my station. I mean, he can handle things

for a while. Maybe I should go with you, Harry. Help you cool down."

"You want to hold my left hand while I stick the knife into my wife with the right?"

"Harry, please! Harry, don't talk that way!"

"Drunk, Karl. That's all I'm going to do. I'm going to drink all I can hold and keep on going. I'm not a murderer."

Harry Stead felt the very blue eyes of the police captain boring into him. He squared his shoulders slightly, attempted to quell the sensation of nausea that swept up from the cramps in his abdomen to blend with the pain that curled down from his headache.

"That's it, Captain," he managed. "That was my Saturday. Karl finished it for you. It was a bad day."

"Are you saying you don't remember anything about it after you and Karl went to the bar?"

"It's fuzzy, Captain. It seems to be there, and yet it isn't. I think I remember being in Karl's car. I think I remember driving home, going inside the house . . ."

"Nothing after that?"

"Nothing. A blank . . . until today."

"I see." Captain Camper paused. "All right, then let's take today.

Tell me what happened today."

"Does today really exist? I keep thinking I'll wake up soon and find all of this to be a nightmare."

"For the moment," the captain said, "concentrate on waking up this morning. Did you wake up in your den? Did you know where you were?"

"Yes, I knew." Harry tried to organize his thoughts, but he found thinking against the headache and the cramps difficult. Reluctantly, he plunged on. "I got up with a helluva hangover, one of the worst I've ever had. I got up and I was sick, and then I finally managed to make and drink some coffee. It helped. Later, I fixed an egg, then I slept again for a couple of hours. It was almost one o'clock this afternoon when I got on my feet again. I still had the hangover. I took aspirins, maybe a whole bottle. I don't know. All I'm sure of is they haven't helped."

"The discovery of your wife's body?" the captain pressed.

"I took the aspirins, then I realized what time it was. I looked for Lynn. I searched the downstairs, and by then I was angry all over again. I remembered Karl coming to my office, what he'd told me. I went upstairs and . . . well, found her."

"Did you love your wife, Stead?"



"Let me put it this way," Harry said after a long silence, "we were married twenty years."

"But did you love her? Would her unfaithfulness—"

"Lynn in the arms of another man? Lynn kissing another man? Yeah, it'd tear me up. It did. Ours wasn't the most compatible marriage in the world, Captain. Frankly, my wife was not a pleasant person. She didn't have enemies, but we didn't have friends, either. Some of that may have been my fault, but I have to say most of the fault was with Lynn. She was a domineering, selfish, envious person. Love her? If it is possible to love that type of person, I loved her."

"Did you ever talk divorce?"

"Once or twice."

"Who talked it?"

"She did."

"Why?" the captain pressed.

"I drink—on occasion."

"Most men do."

"The difference, Captain, is I can't handle liquor. It throws me. Hard."

"From what has been said here this afternoon, I have that impression," Camper admitted.

"It goes back, Captain, to the war. It was a long siege. A man has a given amount of courage, but over that long a siege courage needs bolstering. I found the booster in anything alcoholic I could get my hands on, but after the liberation I couldn't become a whole man again. Alcohol dropped me from hero to bad guy in a hurry, of course, and finally the Army put me in dry dock in a hospital in California. That's where I met Lynn. She was a nurse in the hospital."

"You've never been able to stay off liquor completely though."

"Four, five times a year, Captain, I hit it. That's been my pattern. Normally, I go alone, and finally wake up in some hotel, motel, fleabag somewhere, broke, beat up, sick—but, most important, out of booze."

"Then you are mobile when you drink?"

"I don't just go off in a dark corner with a case of hootch and guzzle, if that's what you mean. I

have to move around a little."

"Do you remember afterward?"

"Nothing, Captain. Those days are blank. It's as if a curtain is dropped—"

"Don't you ever wonder, Stead, what you do, who you meet, where you—"

"Until now, no."

"Why do you wonder now?"

"Because now, Captain, I have the uneasy feeling you think I killed my wife."

"Did you?"

"I'd rather accuse an unidentified prowler."

"You are thinking about the obvious entry to your house, of course. Up the trellis, across the balcony, through doors that had been left open to take advantage of any breeze there might be on a warm night. Yes, the crushed vines on the trellis tell us someone—"

"And the condition of the bedroom, Captain. Don't forget the room. It had been ransacked, remember, and the ring had been taken from my wife's finger. She never took it off herself, Captain. The prowler had to strip it from her."

"I believe you told us it was a pearl ring."

"It was a pearl, period, Captain. The ring mounting was of no value, and the pearl may not be, in dollars and cents. I've never

had it assessed. Its true value to me is in its acquisition, and again I must go back to the war. His name was Manuel. We were true friends. He was killed in spite of some efforts on my part to prevent his death. He gave me the pearl as he was dying. Therefore, its value to me is not imaginable."

"Yet you had it set in a ring for your wife."

"She was fascinated by it."

"Stead, why would a prowler pick your home? Are you that well off financially? Do you have a reputation for being wealthy?"

The sudden change in direction of questions befuddled Harry briefly. He had to take time to adjust his thinking. Finally he said, "You must admit, Captain, the house is pretentious. Perhaps the prowler looked at the house and assumed those who occupied it were wealthy. But he should see my bank account. Maybe four thousand dollars today, and I have to operate my business on that. He should see my bills. He should watch me play golf on a municipal course because I can't afford a country club. He should see my three-year-old sedan. I've never owned a new car in my life."

"Still, the house has to be one of the nicest in the city."

"I bought it when I could afford it, Captain. I bought it when I

came back here with a wife, twenty years ago, with back pay from the Army for months of playing hide-and-seek in the Philippine hills. Lynn wanted a nice house. I bought her a nice house."

"Your wife had a bank account."

Harry was surprised. "You know that?"

"We found a checkbook in her jewelry box." /

"Well, Lynn was an independent person. She wanted money of her own. I gave it to her when I could. It wasn't regular. Some weeks I had nothing to give her."

"Stead, I think you killed your wife. I think you were brought home in a drunken condition last night by Karl Flowers, but I think you might have been faking some of that condition. I think you waited until early this morning, then went up the trellis and into the bedroom and killed your wife as she slept. I think you ransacked the room and took the ring from her finger to make it appear a prowler had invaded your home. I think you then returned downstairs, slept out the night, then called Flowers this afternoon and were hysterical on the phone."

"I wasn't hysterical, Captain. I was numb—as I am now."

"I'm going to book you, Stead."

"Why would I call Karl if I killed her? Why would I allow him

to call you people? Why didn't I run?"

"All right, Stead, I may concede that you didn't know you had killed her, maybe don't even realize now. I may concede that when you committed the act of murder you were in that blank frame of mind you talk about, but the crime remains. You killed your wife."

"Motive?"

"The other man."

"It's conceivable," Harry agreed slowly.

And then he broke. He lunged out of the office and raced down a corridor. When a uniformed policeman appeared in front of him, he threw a solid right fist into the middle of the uniform and spun around the policeman.

Suddenly he was out of the building and in the bright sunshine. A cruising cab caught his eye. He ran to it, piled inside. "International Airfield," he gasped. "Police business."

The cab shot ahead, but several blocks later, in a shoddy residential district, Harry said curtly, "Pull over here, driver."

Harry paid the fare and sent the cab away. Walking quickly a half block, he turned into an alley, found a fire escape ladder, went up to the flat roof of the building. There he sat down behind the parapet and drew his first decent

breath of the whole miserable day.

Harry sat with his knees high, his shoulder blades braced against the parapet, and he winced when the severe cramp grabbed him. He caught his knees and rocked on his haunches while he waited for the pain to subside. Finally, there was relief. He sat back, used stiff fingers to massage neck muscles. At least, the throb of the headache seemed to be lessening.

He attempted to organize his thoughts. He was an expert at eluding. But where could he run? There was a limit on how long a man could run, how long he could hide in a given sector.

Harry looked in his wallet and felt a stab of helplessness. He couldn't run far on fourteen dollars, nor could he go to his bank on a Sunday afternoon. By now, the police would be watching his house. He couldn't even get to his car. He might write a check, but who would cash a check for the amount he needed?

Karl seemed to be his lone hope of escape. There were the weekend receipts at his service station. Karl could not have banked since Friday. There had to be cash available.

Flowers stared at Harry disbelievingly when he answered the knock at the kitchen door. His pregnant wife, Barbara, did not stir

at all from her chair at the table.

"W-what are you doing here?"

Harry stepped into the kitchen quickly, went to a window, held back a curtain, looked out on the neat backyard. Everything looked normal. No lurkers sent to keep surveillance on a house.

Harry turned from the window. Karl now stood behind his wife, his fingers on her shoulders and working convulsively. He looked frightened.

"W-we heard on the radio, just a few minutes ago. We heard you had escaped."

"I didn't kill Lynn, Karl."

"Well, we know that, Harry, but—"

"Where are your kids?"

"At my mother's," Barbara said calmly from the table. "Do you want a cup of coffee, Harry?" She took a coffee pot from an electric burner and got a cup from the cupboard. Her face was expressionless when she looked at him again and poured. "You look as if you need something."

He wanted a drink, but he gratefully accepted the cup of steaming coffee. "Have the police been here?" he asked. "Have they called?"

Karl shook his head.

"Well, I can't stay. They'll be coming. They'll look for me at the house, my office, here, all of the

ordinary places I may normally—"

"We can hide you, Harry," Barbara said. "There's the attic."

"Barbaral!" her husband exploded.

She remained expressionless. "What are friends for, Karl?"

"B-but . . ."

"You helped Harry yesterday. You took care of him last night."

"Sure, but—"

"You should have brought him here last night. You shouldn't have taken him home. You know what Lynn was like when she knew Harry had been drinking. You should have brought him here instead of staying there half the night. We could have taken care of him together. Then . . ." She paused, clamped her lips. "Then Harry wouldn't be involved today."

"Barb, we've been over all of that. We've—"

"Karl, I'm not going to stay," Harry put in. "I'm not going to jeopardize you and your family. But I do need money. Cash. I have to travel, leave the city."

Karl flinched, said nothing.

"Just a little money, Karl," Harry said. "Enough to get me out of town."

"Let's go into the front room," Barbara suggested.

"There isn't time," Harry said. "I have to cut."

"We can talk in there just as



easily as here," she said, "and if the police do come, I can stall them. I can have labor pains."

They went into the front room of the small house. It was a neat room, nothing out of place except the putting iron and the three golf balls on the thin carpeting. Karl had been practicing his game. Now he absently picked up the iron, stood flicking it with his hand.

Harry went to a window, looked out at the street. It appeared quiet. There was a tricycle in the yard, a kid who needed a haircut passing in front of the house.

"Karl!"

Barbara's outburst was Harry's warning. He flinched, ducked, and the whoosh of the golf club as it skimmed across the top of his skull was a loud sound in his ears. He went lower, whirled, pounded a right and a left into Karl's middle, sent Karl stumbling back.

Karl went down to the carpeting hard, the club in his hand useless now. He gasped for air and between the gasps he mumbled, "Police . . . they're going to find him . . . He killed . . . We can't . . . be involved."

Harry stared briefly at Barbara, who was on her knees over her prostrate husband. "I had to do it," he said gruffly. "Luck with the new baby."

She nodded. She was crying.

"Luck . . . anywhere you go, Harry. I'm sorry this had to happen."

The wheezing, pock-marked desk clerk in the decaying hotel accepted Harry's three dollars and 'John Ringlod' registration perfunctorily, and then took him up to the second floor room. Harry hungrily eyed the half-pint bottle of whisky protruding from the clerk's hip pocket.

The clerk noticed, said, "Two dollars. I can get you a fresh bottle for five."

"Get it."

Harry had four dollars left in his wallet when the clerk left the room the second time. He turned out the ceiling light, went to the concaved bed and rolled onto his back.

He drank. He felt on fire. The whisky had reached his blood fast. He drank. Had he killed Lynn? Camper thought he had, and Karl had said he had.

When he awoke again Harry knew where he was without opening his eyes. His body ached. Cautiously, he cracked his eyes to light. There was a sun patch across his legs. He squinted against its brilliance, then groaned and attempted to sit up. The hump down low against his spine made him wince.

When he finally could draw a decent breath, he straightened slowly and braced his stomach with his palms. The pearl was killing him. He had been a damn fool to swallow it, to think he could secrete a pearl in his stomach and not have pain.

Yet, he had to run. He left the room and found the desk in the foyer lobby unattended. No one could later report to the police when he had left the hotel.

Sunshine was warm against him as he quickly walked two blocks. He expected people to notice him, take second looks, stare—perhaps even point accusing fingers—but the other pedestrians did not seem to be paying any particular attention to him.

Harry crossed an alley opening, saw the parked panel truck, heard the idling motor. He slowed his steps, finally stopped. Was the truck his escape?

He returned to the alley. His heart hammering hard, he walked alongside the truck. The cab was empty. He heard a guttural voice and he tensed, then leaped into the truck, yanked it into gear and roared away from the protesting shout.

He had to take a chance now. The stolen truck would be reported immediately, but he had to have the truck to get out of the

city. He glanced at the gas gauge. The needle was just off the empty mark.

He turned a corner, moved into a glut of traffic on a main thoroughfare. He knew he was perhaps two miles from Karl's service station—and Karl was going to help him now, voluntarily or involuntarily!

Karl seemed to be alone in the station when Harry braked the truck beside a row of gas pumps. Straightening from a squatted position in the open doors of the service entrance, Karl left a tire and moved toward the truck with a set smile.

*Karl, thought Harry, if only you were Barbara. Barbara wanted to help. Yesterday she had wanted to hide me. Yesterday she admonished you for taking me home Saturday night. Yesterday she said you . . .*

Harry stiffened with the memory of Barbara Flowers' exact words: *"You should have brought him here instead of staying there half the night."*

Harry timed Karl's approach perfectly, rolling from the truck at the last second. The move brought them chest to chest, and Karl recoiled. Harry caught his uniformed front in his left hand and made a fist of his right hand.

"You lied to Captain Camper,

Karl!" he rasped. "You told the captain you took me home shortly after nine o'clock, put me to bed in the den, then went home to your wife—but yesterday Barbara said you remained at my place half the night! Why did you lie, Karl?"

Karl's face was suddenly an ash color. His jaw worked, his fingers clawed Harry's wrist. Then Harry heard the scrape of shoe leather against concrete behind him. He whirled, crouched. The man standing at the hood of the truck held a gun in his hand.

"Don't, Stead," he said ominously.

Harry whirled again and broke in the opposite direction. Karl had backed into the next alley of pumps. Harry dashed low, waiting for the roar of the gun, the smash of the bullet against his spine. He shot out from the protection of the truck and there was a blur of movement in the corner of his eye. Then something hard and paralyzing cracked down against his skull. He took three short dancing steps and went down to grovel in the blinding pain. Everything fell sharply into focus briefly. He saw two men over him. One held a gun. The other had a blackjack in a ready position, and then darkness closed in on him.

Harry awoke to clarity. He knew

it was daytime and that he was in a hospital room. Captain Camper and a stranger in white stood beside his bed. He felt the stranger, a doctor, examine him, and then he heard the doctor say, "You may have a few minutes, Captain."

There was a tight smile on Camper's face when he said, "You gave us quite a turn, Stead."

"Have—have I had surgery?" Harry knew he had, but he had to be told.

"An appendectomy," Camper nodded.

"Did they find my pearl? It was what you were after, wasn't it? It was all you needed to sew me up as a wife killer."

Camper said, "You had an appendectomy, Stead. No one found a pearl. Karl Flowers says he dropped it in a gutter."

"Karl? A gutter . . ."

"Flowers killed your wife, Stead. Didn't you know? From what one of my men overheard you say at the station—"

"I thought he had lied, that's all."

"Yes." Camper took a moment, then said, "Flowers was your wife's lover, Stead. That story he told you about her meeting a man at the hotel was designed to trigger you. He knew how you would react. He knew you would turn to a bottle, and he wanted you drunk and in your home while he went up the

trellis and into the bedroom to kill her. He wanted you to find her body yesterday morning.. He wanted you—and us—to think you had murdered while drunk."

"K-Karl and Lynn . . ."

"You apparently have a blind side when you are sober, too, Stead. They haven't been seeing each other for some time—about eight months to be exact—but until Flowers found out his wife was pregnant again they were having an affair. The pregnancy apparently brought Flowers to his senses, but it also turned your wife to blackmail. When he stopped meeting her, she threatened to go to Barbara. She was collecting fifty dollars a week from Flowers, every Saturday afternoon when you sent her to his service station to get gas for your car. He has been taking cash from the station till. Then, on Mondays, your wife has been making a fifty dollar deposit in a savings account at the bank. Her bankbook shows she has made the weekly deposits for the past eight months. There have been no withdrawals."

Harry drew a long breath. "How, Captain, did you discover all of this?"

"To begin with, I didn't buy the prowler story. I've been in this business too long. I know how prowlers work. Sure, the bedroom

had been torn up, but it hadn't been prowled. The only thing missing was the ring taken from your wife's finger. Your wife's jewelry box was on a dresser top, it was small, and it was locked. The fact that it was locked indicated there was something of value inside, but the box was on the dresser when you called us to your home. Later, we found your wife's checkbook, the savings deposit book with its entries, and five ten-dollar bills. Do you remember my quizzing you about your financial condition, your house?"

"Yes," Harry said slowly.

"Well, at that time I thought you were your wife's slayer, but I was curious when you told me you did not habitually turn over a specific amount of money to her each week. You volunteered that information. I didn't ask for it, and the volunteering triggered my curiosity. I already had the jewelry box and the bankbook, and I wondered if it were possible your wife had an income you knew nothing about. I roused some bank people early this morning, then checked your credit rating, and discovered you had told the truth about your financial condition. This, of course, made me curious about those weekly deposits made by your wife. Did she have a hobby that might provide such an income—or did

she have a lover who might provide? Flowers had told me, as he told you, that he saw your wife meet a man at the hotel, saw them kiss, then enter the hotel. Meeting on a Saturday afternoon also fit the pattern, since your wife had use of your car every Saturday. She could meet her lover, collect her weekly allowance, make her deposit on Mondays. Then I made a discovery, Stead. I found out Karl Flowers had not been entirely truthful about Saturday night."

"B-Barbara?" Harry said weakly.

Camper nodded and admitted, "I stumbled on this discrepancy, actually. Routinely, I checked the time element with his wife. After all, he could have taken you home, gone upstairs and killed your wife. I didn't think he had, but in this business you don't pass up even the most unlikely. Surprisingly, she said her husband hadn't come in until around two o'clock Sunday morning."

"Why, I asked myself," Camper went on, "would a man not be entirely truthful when he is *volunteering* information? It made me wonder about Flowers. I had *some* facts. I had you, a man who can't handle liquor by his own admission, drunk. I had Flowers, a man close enough to you to be aware of how you are when you drink.

I had your wife making weekly deposits of fifty dollars in a bank. I had her *probably* making her collection every Saturday. I had her *gassing up the car at Karl Flowers' service station*. Now, if I supposed Flowers was, or had been, her lover, if I supposed that Flowers had manufactured a story about a hotel lover, if I supposed that blackmail payoff could be made in a service station—"

"Do you have Karl in custody?" Harry broke in.

"Yes."

"And he has confessed?"

"He broke immediately."

"This morning at the station," Harry said, "there were two of your men. Were they there to arrest Karl? Did I drive into—"

"No," Camper interrupted. "I still was supposing when you arrived at the station. Those men were stakeouts. I had other men at your house, Flowers' home, and a few other places. We were watching for you. That, too, is routine."

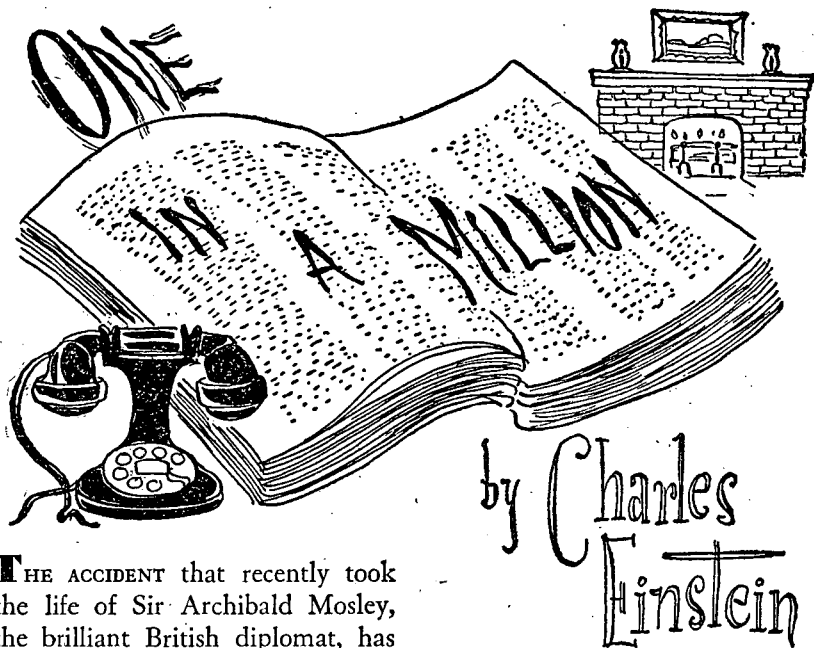
Harry lay quiet then, his thoughts whirling. Finally, he asked, "My pearl? Karl said he threw my pearl into a gutter?"

"Yes," Camper said somberly. "He doesn't remember where."

"A gutter. Well, Captain, perhaps that's where it belongs. It's tainted now, lost its true luster."

The captain nodded agreement.

*One may conclude that a most excellent way to save a life is simply to refrain from killing it.*



**T**HE ACCIDENT that recently took the life of Sir Archibald Mosley, the brilliant British diplomat, has been described as a one-in-a-million shot, as well it might. Sir Archibald was struck by lightning.

Naturally, those of us who knew him were most affected by his death, and at the Overseas Press Club in New York the other day we talked about him, and about the ways that men may die.

"I suppose it's all right to tell this story now," old Bert Hen-

nessy of Global News said, "but actually I saved Sir Archibald's life for him once, maybe twelve years ago or so."

Somebody else said, "I never knew Sir Archibald's life was in danger."

"Oh," Hennessy said, "but it was."

"In danger of what?"

"A million-to-one shot. Same as the bolt of lightning that finally killed him." Hennessy filled his pipe. "Matter of fact, it cost me a hundred dollars. If he hadn't been such a clever old coot . . ."

He paused reflectively, but none of us would let it go at that. So he nodded and told us the story.

You remember (Hennessy said) that in those days, just after the war, I was married to that society lady with all the money. She paid the rent on the Park Avenue apartment and she threw all the swanky parties, and I was along for the ride. Well. In those days, Sir Archibald was famous mostly for the book he'd written on mediums and seances and clairvoyance. Maybe you remember it; it was a big thing at the time. He said the whole business was hogwash, and as the leader of a worldwide movement to debunk it, he was quite well known. At that time he'd just started his career with the British delegation to the UN.

Anyway, he was a guest at one of our parties one night, and he was holding forth again on what phonies all these mystics are. While he was talking, the phone rang. I picked it up in the livingroom and it was nothing but a wrong number. That got us on the subject of

telephones, and finally I said, "Sir Archibald, I'd like to make you a proposition. I will bet you a hundred dollars that you can pick out any object in this room, then we'll dial any number you want out of the Manhattan telephone directory, and whoever answers the phone will tell you what object it was you picked out."

Well, at first, of course, he didn't think I was leveling. But I told him I was, and I asked my wife to go get a hundred dollars from the bedroom (from *her* purse, naturally, though I didn't stress that part) and she did, and Sir Archibald sort of had to go along with it. I mean, after all the talking he'd been doing.

So he said, "The picture over the fireplace." I said that would be fine. Then he went to the phone book and picked out a number. I still remember it: Edward R. Davis, MAin 6-9804. So I said, "Okay," and picked up the receiver.

"You're sure," I said to him, "you want the picture over the fireplace?"

"That's right," he said, "and I also want to watch you dial the number."

I told you he was a clever one. So he stood over me as I dialed, and when a man's voice answered at the other end, I simply said;

"Just a minute," and handed the receiver to Sir Archibald.

He said into the phone, "What did I pick out, Mr. Davis?"

I could tell by the look on Sir Archibald's face that the answer he got was, "The picture over the fireplace." The look on his face! He dropped the receiver, went absolutely white, clutched at his throat, closed his eyes, and fell to the floor.

For one frantic moment I didn't know what I'd done. But he was breathing all right. We slapped his wrists and forced some brandy between his lips, and after a few moments he'd come around, and his color was back. He sat on the sofa and looked at me and began to laugh.

"Very good," he said to me. "Very good indeed." I could see he was thinking.

"I don't really want the hundred dollars," I said (believe me, I could have used a hundred for my own pocket).

"Ah," he said, "but you shall have it—after we have made one simple test."

"Test? What more is there?"

He held up a hand. "Let me state a theory," he said. "I put it to you that several minutes ago, the telephone rang and you picked it up and said it was a wrong number, then hung up again. I put it



to you that the person on the other end, who had called your number, did not have a wrong number but was actually a friend of yours. When you hung up the receiver, the friend did not hang up the receiver at his end. He stayed on the telephone. Therefore, the connection *was not broken*. The next time you picked up the phone, you would still be talking to your friend!

"Now," Sir Archibald went on, "the rest is simple. I pick out an object, then a phone number from



the book. You pick up the phone. As you pick it up, you repeat to me the name of the object I picked out—so your friend can hear it at the other end. You let me watch you dial, so I can be sure you are calling Edward R. Davis at MAIn 6-9804, but the important thing is that you keep the receiver to your own ear, so I do not hear that there is no dial tone. The act of dialing itself gives off a number of clicks in your ear but does not break the connection. Then you wait till 'Mr. Davis' comes and 'answers' the phone and hand the receiver over to me."

Well, I heard him out. Then I said, "Fine—as theories go. But how are you going to prove it?"

"Merely," he replied, "by now picking up the phone once more—now that your friend has hung up—and dialing the same number and asking the real Mr. Davis what it was I picked out."

Well, I was beat and I knew it. I said, "Sir Archibald, you win." And I gave him the hundred.

Can you imagine that old guy being clever enough to figure out

a stunt like that? It was amazing.

Bert Hennessy leaned back reflectively and pulled at his pipe.

Somebody said, "Yes, but that only tells how you lost the hundred dollars to Sir Archibald. What about how you saved his life from a one-in-a-million shot?"

"By paying him off before he dialed Edward R. Davis at MAIn 6-9804," Hennessy said. "The one-in-a-million shot was that this name and number, which Sir Archibald himself had picked out of the Manhattan book, belonged to my friend at the other end of the phone. Unheard-of coincidence, maybe, but no more so than getting hit by a bolt of lightning. My friend—the one who was in on the trick with me and who'd phoned my number to start it off—just happened to *be* Edward R. Davis at MAIn 6-9804.

"Sir Archibald would have called Davis, Davis would have told him the picture over the fireplace just as he did the first time, and I realized this time the shock would have killed the old boy."



When "dreadful innocence" emanates truth, can "dreadful reasonableness" deny?



# COUSIN KELLY



SHE HAD an intimate little liturgy which she repeated every morning when she awakened, as if it were somehow essential, by the repetition, to orient herself anew to an ancient and confusing world in which, otherwise, she might easily become lost: *I am Teresa Standish. I am eight years old, and I live at the Eastland Arms in Apartment 515. Today I am going to . . .*

From there on the liturgy varied, of course, according to what she had planned yesterday to do today. She did not include the tedious details of what had been planned for her, or what, in the nature of things as they were, she would do simply because it had been or-

by Fletcher  
Flora



dained that she must. She included only the item or items on the day's agenda which offered the promise of being exceptional and exciting and of saving the day from the burden of expectations that did not. Sometimes the promise was fulfilled and sometimes it wasn't, for life is loaded with disappointments, but on Saturdays and Sundays it was *always* fulfilled, and Saturdays and Sundays were, therefore, the very best days of the week.

When she awakened in the morning of those days, the liturgy was invariably completed: *Today I am going to see Cousin Kelly.*

This particular day to which she wakened was Saturday, and between it and the preceding Sunday there had been six long days of broken promises, of hope and expectations unfulfilled. After repeating the liturgy, which was like an incantation to the shining sun that spilled its golden light through her window and across her bed, she lay quietly for a while in the warm and secure assurance of what the day surely held, and then she got up and began to dress.

Because it was the beginning of a bright and golden day, she put on a pale yellow jumper with a crisp white blouse. She would meet Cousin Kelly, she decided, in the park across the boulevard from the apartment building. Last Sunday

had been a gray and sunless day, expiring interminably to the tearful sound of persistent rain, and Cousin Kelly had come to the apartment, right up to her room where she now was, and they had listened to some music on her phonograph and had talked about what had happened during the week and had played a long and delightful game of Monopoly, which she had won. It had been a good day, that part of it in the afternoon when Cousin Kelly was here, but it had not been as good by half as this one would be on the bright green grass of the park under the warm sun. They would sit on a bench and walk along the path under the trees and laugh with delight at their distorted reflections in the pool of clear water around the fountain. Cousin Kelly was actually old, over twenty, but he didn't look or act old, and he was more fun to be with than anyone else in all the world.

It was odd that Mother didn't like him. After all, he was really Mother's cousin, the son of her father's sister. Of course, lots of people didn't necessarily like their cousins, because there was no law saying you had to or anything, but Teresa couldn't understand why anyone wouldn't like Cousin Kelly, cousin or not. But Mother didn't. Neither did Father. Teresa could

tell from the way their eyes went blank whenever she, Teresa, happened to mention seeing Cousin Kelly, and from the way, immediately after the mentioning, they deliberately tried to change the subject. Cousin Kelly knew, too. He knew, but he never talked about it. Maybe something had happened once in the family. Maybe something dreadful had happened to change everything from the way everything had been, and to make enemies of people who should have been friends.

Teresa didn't care. At first she had, but not any longer. Whatever the trouble, she liked Cousin Kelly better than anyone else. She *loved* Cousin Kelly. She wished and wished that he could come to live with them in the apartment. She loved him far more, to tell the truth, than she loved Mother and Father. In fact, she didn't love Mother and Father at all, although she didn't, on the contrary, hate them, either. She was merely indifferent to them. In the beginning it had made her feel guilty and unhappy, the secret knowledge of her indifference, but now it was just something that she lived with every day and hardly ever thought about.

Dressed in her pale yellow jumper and white blouse, she went out of the room and onto a gallery

that ran along the wall above the deep pit of the livingroom. She descended the stairs at one end of the gallery and turned back from there through a dining room to the kitchen, where Hannah was. Hannah came in every day from nine to six to cook and clean. Sometimes, when Mother and Father entertained, she stayed later. She was fat and jolly and ages old, and Teresa liked her.

"Good-morning, missy," Hannah said. "You're mighty prettied up this morning, I must say."

"This afternoon," said Teresa, "I'm going to the park to meet a friend."

"That's nice. Meanwhile, what would you like for breakfast?"

"A poached egg, please, with two strips of bacon. And one slice of toast."

"Simple enough. You just sit down there and keep Hannah company while she's fixing it."

Teresa sat at the kitchen table and watched while Hannah broke the egg in the funny little poaching pan and put two strips of bacon on the grill. The bacon began to sizzle, and the water began to boil in the little pan under the cup the egg was in. Teresa liked to sit in the kitchen and watch Hannah cook her breakfast. Hannah always said it kept her company, and it was true, although they talked very

little while Hannah worked, or not at all. That was one of the nice things about Hannah. You could sit with her and say nothing and still feel comfortably that you were keeping company. It was different with Mother. When you sat with Mother and said nothing for a long time, you always felt uneasily that something should be said, and after a while you tried to say it, and it always came out wrong and awkward, and then you wished you hadn't tried.

Teresa ate her egg and bacon and toast at the kitchen table, and then, leaving Hannah to her work, went back into the livingroom and wondered how she could spend the time, which was almost forever, until it was afternoon. She thought about going down in the elevator and outside to talk to the doorman and stroll up and down the sidewalk, but she didn't want to do that because there was the day out there, warm and golden and waiting, and she wanted to enter it for the first time, fresh and exciting with nothing worn off, when she went out to meet Cousin Kelly. So, saving the day for a special hour, she looked at magazines in the livingroom until it was after eleven and she could go up to see Mother, who was now probably awake.

Sure enough, she was. Mother was sitting up in bed, braced

against the headboard, and in one hand was a saucer, and in the other, momentarily stopped halfway between the saucer and her mouth, was a cup of coffee, which had been served by Hannah and from which Mother had just taken a sip. A second bed near Mother's



was rumpled and empty. This bed was Father's, of course, and it was apparent that Father had risen early and gone away somewhere, probably downtown to his office. Father did not usually go to his office on Saturdays, but once in a while he went when he had an appointment that promised to be profitable, and you could always tell by Father's humor when he got home if things had gone well or not. If things had gone well, he was expansive and tolerant. If things had gone ill, he was cross

and critical and could hardly wait for five o'clock, when he allowed himself his first cocktail of the day.

Mother's cup rattled in her saucer, and she spoke to Teresa with a cheerfulness that was forced and bright and artificial. Mother, in fact, looked as if she needed a cocktail already, although it was not yet noon; or perhaps she only needed a little longer to recover from those she had had the night before. The flesh was smudged beneath her eyes, and her face, cleaned of make-up, looked drawn and tired and older than it was.

"Good morning, darling," Mother said. "Have you been up long?"

"Oh, yes," Teresa said. "It's almost noon."

"That late? Did Hannah give you your breakfast?"

"Yes. I had an egg and two strips of bacon."

Mother reacted as if the words were painful to her. Her mouth turned down, becoming for a moment really ugly, and she set her cup and saucer carefully aside on the table between her bed and Father's.

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing much. I looked at some magazines." Teresa hesitated, feeling within her the sudden singing exhilaration of her anticipation. "This afternoon I would like to go

across to the park. May I, please?"

"I think it would be all right if you are careful crossing the boulevard. Why do you want to go to the park?"

"I'm going to meet Cousin Kelly there."

There it was again, that strange blankness in Mother's eyes, the curious cold hardening of her face.

"I hope you are not going to be difficult, Teresa," Mother said.

The remark seemed so irrational, so utterly unrelated to anything that had been said or to any intention that Teresa had, that it was quite hopeless to try to respond to it. Teresa in her hopelessness was silent, and after a moment Mother's shoulders moved slightly in a gesture that was not big enough to be a shrug.

"Well, you have a nice time in the park, darling, and be sure you have your lunch before you go."

This was clearly a dismissal, and Teresa, relieved, went downstairs and out to the kitchen to keep Hannah company. At one o'clock, Hannah gave her lunch, tomato soup and crackers spread with soft cheese and a green salad and milk. After she had eaten her lunch it was almost one-thirty, and Teresa returned to the livingroom and sat down on the edge of a chair and deliberately waited and waited while her anticipation of the after-

noon grew and grew and became so intense that it could no longer be borne, and then, at last, she left the apartment and went downstairs and out into the golden, sunbathed street. At the curb she paused and looked left for traffic, and then she ran across to a medial strip that divided the boulevard, there pausing again and this time looking right. Safely all the way across, she entered the park, passing between stone pillars, and followed a concrete walk as far as a green wooden bench within sight of the fountain, which tossed into the air a glittering shower that fell, the upward force of the fountain spent, back into the surrounding pool with a sound of summer rain. Sitting there on the bench, watching the fountain, she waited.

Waiting, she tried to remember where and when she had first seen Cousin Kelly, and she couldn't. As hard as she tried, she couldn't for the life of her. He had just suddenly come into her life, that was all, and her life, which had been lonely, was filled thereafter with love requited and promises kept. It did not matter where and when he had come. It only mattered that he had come somewhere and sometime, and that he was, having approached quietly in the midst of her pondering, there at this instant.

He stood a step away on the con-

crete walk and smiled down at her. His hair was thick and pale blond; he never wore a hat, winter or summer, and the sunlight touched the hair and turned it to silver. His eyes were blue, brimming with grave and secret laughter, and below one of the eyes, running down at an angle across his cheek, was the lingering trace of an old scar.

"Hello, Tess," he said.

He was the only one who called her that. Hannah called her missy or Teresa, and Mother called her Teresa or darling, and Father called her Teresa or child, but Cousin Kelly always called her by the warm diminutive, and it was something special between them, another secret shared. Rising, she held out a hand, and he took it and kept it in his.

"Hello, Cousin Kelly. I've been waiting: for you."

"Am I late?"

"Oh, no. I was early."

"I'm flattered. Shall we walk over to the fountain?"

"I'd like that. And then perhaps we can walk under the trees."

So they went over to the fountain and laughed at their distorted reflections in the pool, and Cousin Kelly told her about the foolish Grecian boy who had fallen in love with himself when looking at his reflection in another pool long ago. She had heard the story be-

fore, but it seemed new and much more exciting the way Cousin Kelly told it. Afterward they began walking on the grass beneath the trees, trying to identify each tree by the size and shape of its leaves, and they held hands all the while. There was only one tiny blemish on the nearly perfect afternoon.

That was when they met Mrs. Carter. Mrs. Carter lived in the apartment building on the fourth floor, and she was walking her poodle in the park on a leash. Teresa and Cousin Kelly had come across the grass, and Mrs. Carter was strolling along the walk, pausing now and again to let the poodle sniff at things and do his duty, and they all just happened to reach a certain point from different directions at the same time. Teresa spoke politely to Mrs. Carter, who pulled up the poodle and stopped to exchange a few words with Teresa, and this was all right except that Mrs. Carter paid absolutely no attention to Cousin Kelly, although he was standing there holding Teresa by the hand all the while. For all the recognition Mrs. Carter gave him, Cousin Kelly might as well have been somewhere else, and Teresa thought it was very rude of Mrs. Carter. Afterward she told Cousin Kelly how rude she thought Mrs. Carter had

been, but Cousin Kelly only laughed and said it didn't matter, and actually, considering all the rest of the wonderful afternoon, it didn't.

Eventually they came back to the bench from which they had started. They sat down together to rest and talk, and Teresa was beginning to feel sad because it was getting late, almost five o'clock, and soon she would have to leave.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" Teresa asked.

"If you wish."

"Where shall I meet you?"

"If it's another nice day, we can meet here. Otherwise, wait for me in your room, like last Sunday, and I'll slip up."

It had gotten a little cooler, and the shadows of everything lay longer to the east on the grass, and Teresa's sense of sadness was growing stronger.

"It's so long from Sunday to Saturday," she said.

"Yes," he said, "it is."

"I wish you could come and live with me all the time."

"Do you, Tess? So do I."

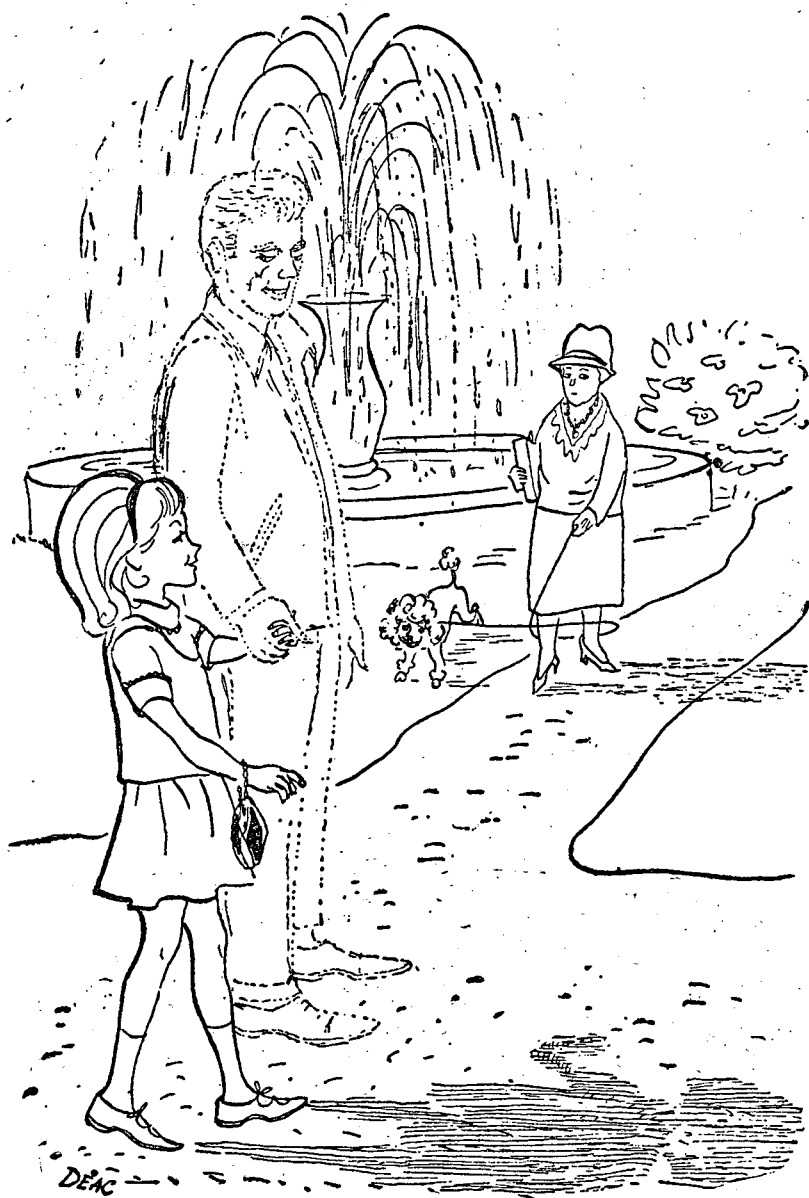
"Why don't Mother and Father like you?"

"It's an old story, but never mind. You could make them like me if you tried."

"How could I?"

He reached into a pocket of his





jacket and brought out a sealed white envelope with something in it. His voice was light, and the grave laughter was in his eyes.

"By putting some of this in something they drink," he said.

"What is it?"

"It's a love potion."

"You mean like in fairy stories?"

"Yes."

"I thought that was only make-believe."

"Oh, no. There is more truth than you imagine in fairy stories. When your mother and father drink something with some of this powder in it, they will immediately like me, just as you do, and then they will ask me to come and stay with you all the time."

"Do you really think so?"

"Try it and see."

He extended the envelope, and she took it and put it in the pocket of her yellow jumper.

"I will," she said.

Then it was time to go. Father would surely be home from the office, and Mother would be getting cross and anxious, and pretty soon, if Teresa didn't hurry, would be sending Hannah across the boulevard to fetch her. Parting from Cousin Kelly was not so hard on Saturdays as it was on Sundays, anyhow, because the time between parting and meeting was so much shorter. So, saying good-bye, she

hurried off down the walk toward the stone gate. Once she stopped and turned and waved, and Cousin Kelly, waiting and watching by the bench, waved back, then turned and went away himself in the opposite direction.

In the apartment, Mother and Father were sitting together in the livingroom. It was immediately apparent to Teresa from Father's expression that his day had not gone well, and the atmosphere in the livingroom was oppressive, but there was, fortunately, imminent hope of relief, for it was time for cocktails. Teresa said hello politely to Father, who grunted, and Mother looked as she invariably did when she was about to be moderately severe about something.

"Where have you been all this time, Teresa?" Mother asked.

"I told you where I was going, Mother. I went to the park. You gave me permission."

"I didn't give you permission to stay indefinitely."

"I'm sorry. It was such a nice afternoon, and I was with Cousin Kelly."

Father looked up angrily and slapped the arm of his chair with the flat of his hand.

"Cousin Kelly again! However did the child get started on this thing? When did she ever even hear of Kelly?"

Mother must have heard Father's outburst, but she gave no sign of it. Her expression had changed suddenly to the cold and stony one which warned that she had at last had all of something that she could stand, and had determined to resolve a problem, no matter how unpleasant the resolving might be. Her voice, as if in compensation, was softly fraught with dreadful reasonableness.

"You did not see Cousin Kelly," she said. "You did not see Cousin Kelly this afternoon or any other afternoon, because Cousin Kelly is dead. He was dead and buried, Teresa, before you were born."

Teresa heard the words, of course, but they had no higher meaning. They did not prick her intelligence or elicit an emotional reaction. How could Cousin Kelly be dead when she had just parted from him in the park?

"I saw him this afternoon," she said, "and I'll see him again tomorrow. I see him every Saturday and Sunday."

"The child has a morbid imagination, that's all," Father said. "She needs professional attention. Tell me, Teresa, what does Cousin Kelly look like? Describe him for me."

"He is about as tall as you," Teresa said, "but much thinner. He has very light hair that looks silver

in the sun, and he has blue eyes that laugh. On one cheek he has a scar that sometimes you can hardly see."

Father looked stunned for a moment, and Mother caught her breath with a sharp gasp.

"She's seen a picture somewhere," Father said. "She's surely seen a picture."

"This must stop!" Mother's voice still held that dreadful reasonableness, her face the expression of grim decision. "Listen to me, Teresa. Cousin Kelly is dead. He is dead because I killed him. It was an accident, a tragic accident, and it happened years ago. We had taken an outing in the country, Kelly and I and our parents. We had gone to a place high on a bluff above a river. Kelly and I had quarreled. I was furious with him. I wanted to be alone, and I walked away from the others to the edge of the bluff, but Kelly followed. He came up beside me and took me by the arm and started to say something. I turned and jerked my arm free. I don't know what happened exactly. I must have pushed him without thinking or meaning to." Mother's voice was silent, the horror of that remote moment invoked again by the telling, and then it went on quietly and quickly, as if to be done as soon as could be. "He was standing

at the edge of the bluff, and he fell over. He was killed. He was dead when my father and my uncle reached him. They always blamed me, my aunt and uncle—Kelly's mother and father. They still do. They thought I pushed him deliberately in a fit of anger. But it was an accident. That's all it was, Teresa. It was a terrible accident, and Cousin Kelly is dead."

Teresa turned and walked away to the far end of the livingroom. Turning again, she looked back at Mother and Father.

"Cousin Kelly is alive," she said, "and he is coming soon to live with us here."

She went on into the dining room, passing from view. Ahead of her, beyond the louvered swinging door to the kitchen, she heard Hannah at work. She pushed through the door and saw that Hannah had deserted her cleaning paraphernalia long enough to prepare cocktails. The silver shaker was on a tray on the cabinet, and beside the shaker were two fragile, long-stemmed glasses. Hannah looked hurried and harassed. It was after five, and she was obviously anxious to be away by six.

"Let me take the tray, Hannah," Teresa said.

"I'm sure I'd be grateful to you for saving me the steps," Hannah said. "Mind you don't spill it,

missy. Watch where you're going."

Teresa took the tray and pushed back through the louvered door into the dining room. In the pocket of her yellow jumper, the love potion felt as heavy as gold dust.

It was all over, everything done that needed doing, and everyone gone who had been there except a worn and rather seedy little man and Teresa and Hannah. The man spoke with gentle weariness in a tone of futility.

"Now, Teresa," he said, "tell me again exactly where you got the pois—the 'love potion'."

"Cousin Kelly gave it to me. We were in the park."

"Why did Cousin Kelly give it to you?"

"It was supposed to make Mother and Father love him. Then he could come and live with us here."

"Your mother and father didn't love Cousin Kelly?"

"No." She paused, a shadow passing across her eyes, as if she were struck for a moment by a presentiment of wonder. "Mother said that Cousin Kelly was dead."

"I know."

"She said he died years ago. He fell off a cliff. But he wasn't. Dead, I mean. I was in the park with him this afternoon."

"And you met your neighbor there? What is her name?"

"Mrs. Carter. She was rude to Cousin Kelly. He was standing right there, holding my hand, and she ignored him."

"Are you sure she saw him?"

"How could she have helped? He was standing right *there*."

"Mrs. Carter told me that you were alone when she saw you. There was no one with you at all."

"I don't understand it." Again the shadow passed over her eyes. "He was holding my hand, and later he gave me the love potion."

"All right." The little policeman stirred uneasily. He was feeling, for some reason, a chill in his bones. "Last Sunday it rained. You couldn't go to the park, and so Cousin Kelly visited you here. Isn't that what you told me?"

"Yes. He came right up to my room. He was there all afternoon."

"Poor little dear." Hannah reached an arm toward Teresa as if to brush from the child the gathering shadows of evil. "She has been alone too much. She lives in fantasy."

"You are certain that no one came last Sunday?"

"There was no one here but the family and me. No one. The hall door is kept locked on the inside. No one could have entered without being admitted."

"Do you think that Mrs. Carter would deliberately lie about not seeing Cousin Kelly in the park?"

"No."

"Do you think your mother would have lied about his being dead?"

"No."

"Do you think Hannah would have lied about his not being here last Sunday?"

"No."

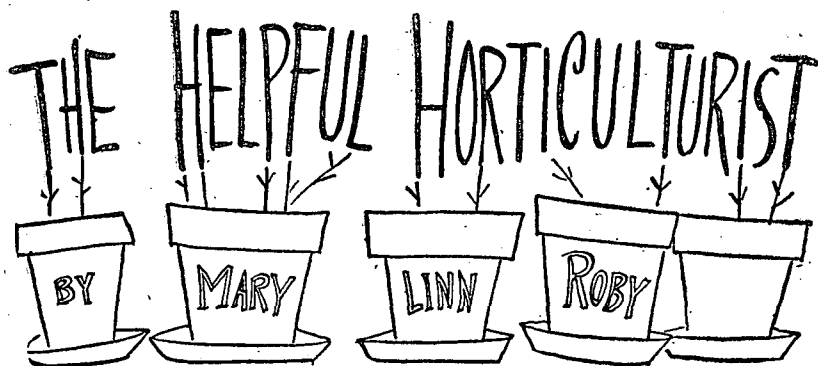
"There you are, then." Leaning forward, he spoke slowly with a kind of dreadful reasonableness, and every tired syllable was an echo of his dread and a measure of his futility. "Listen to me, Teresa. You must tell me exactly where you got the love potion. It's very important."

And she met his dreadful reasonableness, as he had known she would, with dreadful innocence.

"Cousin Kelly gave it to me. In the park. He was *there*."



The operation of a small business has its hazards, to say the least, but there is a certain satisfaction in knowing that one has served his customers well.



WALTER MORTON stood in his neat little walled garden and looked about with satisfaction. The *Nenisternun canadense* seemed to be thriving; its smooth green leaves and small white flowers beaming up at him as though proudly to draw his attention to the small cluster of black grape-like berries hanging beneath them.

Walter hummed a little song as he went to look at the *Iriglochin maritima*. Last week he had feared they were about to die. No matter how often he had drained sea water into the little bog he had built for them, the dears simply would not catch on. Walter was

certain that, if he could simply get them to thrive, they would be one of his biggest sellers.

"Perking up, aren't you, my dears?" Walter said as he examined the spike-like petals.

The *Thlastiaivense* was doing well, too. Walter looked at it thoughtfully. Perhaps he could make up a few boxes of it today. Mr. Brand in Portland, Oregon, had been quite insistent in his letters. But Walter's was a business which could not be rushed, as he often told his clients.

Now, breathing deeply of the fresh, sunny air, he turned and went back into the cozy little

house. Of all the furnished homes he had rented, Walter believed he liked this one best. The townspeople were friendly, but not persistent, and it was quite possible to keep relationships on a casual basis. Sometimes, Walter thought

things as nearly the same as possible: at six a shower, then breakfast, and out into the garden for a quick look around; back to tidy up the house, then out for some serious work before the sun became too hot; at eleven a tea break,



it might have been nice to have had more friends. Still, his gardening was a full-time occupation for him; it was not as though it were simply a hobby. There was the paperwork to look after, and the mailing and sorting. Actually, too, Walter found his relationships with his customers completely satisfying. He was rendering services every day—services of inestimable value—and that was enough for him. Besides, he was a man who liked routine.

Smiling to himself, Walter took the milk from the refrigerator and poured a little into a bowl for his cat. Every day he tried to keep

and then, as now, it was time to package a few things so they could go out with the one o'clock delivery.

Going out into his potting shed, Walter Morton took out his wrapping paper and a notebook. On the table was the box of *Saponaria vaccaria*. These were going all the way to Michigan, and Walter was afraid the pale red flowers would be a little wilted by the time they got there. But, he reminded himself, that didn't really matter as long as the cell at the base of each plant was full of round, black seeds.

Moving his fingers deftly, Walter

packaged the plants, and then turned to his address book. Yes, there it was: Mr. Albert Andrews, and the address.

Walter paused for a moment to look at the newspaper clipping which he had pasted on the page opposite. He had found this one in his daily edition of a New York paper. Really, there was no end to the interesting stories one might find leading to new business. There had been quite a little article on how Mr. Andrews, after having lived with and cared for his wealthy uncle most of his adult life as a sort of glorified valet, had just received his inheritance in the form of a rowboat and two oars, while the remainder of the multimillion-dollar estate had gone, for her lifetime, to an elderly female cousin who was noted for her excellent physical condition. On her death, the money was to revert to Mr. Andrews.

Something had told Walter, as he had read that article, that the elderly cousin would outlive Mr. Andrews with one hand tied behind her back. That sort always did. Walter had been so certain he was right that he had slipped one of his colorful brochures into an envelope that very minute and mailed it off to Mr. Andrews, after finding his address in one of the many huge city telephone direc-

tories which he found so indispensable.

Mr. Andrews' response had been more than gratifying, Walter recalled fondly as he printed the correct address in large black letters on the top of the box. Mr. Andrews' order and check had arrived within three days.

The sun, shining in through the single, spotlessly clean window of the shed, struck Walter warmly on the shoulders, making him feel completely relaxed. There was plenty of time before the mail went out. Perhaps he could break away from the routine just this once to smoke a pipe.

Humming a little song, Walter savored the smoke. Leaning against the wall, he flipped idly through the leaves of his notebook. When he thought of the real-life drama there was between these pages, sometimes it made him wonder if, when he retired, he shouldn't write a book.

There was Mrs. Soames, for example. Her picture had appeared directly over the headline, 'CAFE SOCIETY LEADER TO DIVORCE'. It had been her face that had attracted Walter's attention, the look in her eyes. She was with a man and a younger woman, and if Walter had ever seen hatred before, that was what was in the glance the camera had immortal-



ized. The article, written by a leading gossip columnist, had just skirted libel.

"Rumor has it that Shirley Soames is not as eager to come to a parting of the ways as is Mr. Soames, who has been seen about town frequently with the gorgeous Evelyn Eire, presently taking some time off from spending Daddy's fortune to dabble in stage and screen work. Shirley Soames will be remembered as a former beauty of the cosmopolitan world."

There had been more, but it had not been necessary for Walter to read it. He was not obtuse. As soon as he had seen the picture he had been certain that here was a desperate woman.

Mrs. Soames had been a bit slow about reacting to his brochure but, in the end, she had ordered a box of *Kalmia latifolia*, sometimes called mountain laurel. There was another small clipping on this page; Walter still remembered how heartwarming the news had been to him. Miss Eire had drowned, not two weeks afterward, while attending a beach party with Mr. Soames. Apparently, not twenty feet from shore, she had succumbed to a disabling cramp. The article noted that Mrs. Soames had been among the many guests.

Walter flipped through the pages of the notebook. Then there had

been Malcolm Doak, the man who couldn't get married until his mother died. Walter had heard about him through a magazine article in one of those slick women's magazines. Walter was an avid reader of anything that might provide information which might be useful to business.

Mr. Doak had been interviewed by the magazine along with a lot of other men, all bachelors, concerning his reasons for staying in an unmarried state. It had been a tape recorded interview, and had been most informal and revealing; more revealing, at least to Walter, than many of the gentlemen had probably realized.

Doak, for example, had laughed and joked, but there had been sheer tragedy behind the pseudo frankness. "I suppose I just couldn't leave Mother," he had said. "I'm sure she wouldn't put up with competition from another woman in my life." Then Mr. Doak had laughed, and the interviewer had laughed. It was one of those articles in which even the physical reactions of those involved are noted.

"If you will only stop joking, Mr. Doak," the interviewer had protested, whereupon Mr. Doak had gone on to give very logical reasons for remaining a bachelor, with no mention of Mother. But Walter believed that his first an-

swer had been the correct one, and sent a brochure.

Mr. Doak had expressed an interest in *Solanum tuberosum*, a common Irish potato. Common except that the tubers—Walter always sent several—had been grown in direct exposure to sunlight. Into the package Walter had, of course, inserted the caution that this particular type of potato was unfit as food. Unfortunately, someone must have ignored his warning, for shortly afterward he had noted mention of Mr. Doak's mother's funeral. It had been a really grand affair. Walter could just imagine Mr. Doak telling his friends that nothing was too good for his mother.

Walter knocked out his pipe and closed the notebook. He frowned as the doorbell rang. He did not encourage visitors. They interrupted his routine. Besides, direct contact with other people had always made him feel uncomfortable. That was why this mail order business was so right for him; no need to meet anyone face to face. Still, there was a certain gratifying personal contact.

Walter opened the front door. It was the police. *Two* policemen.

Walter smiled and invited them in. It was not his first encounter with the law. Still smiling, he ushered them into his immaculate

livingroom hospitably, quietly.

"Now then, Mr. Morton," the heavier of the two said as he lowered himself into Walter's favorite armchair. "You operate a horticultural mail order service, I understand." He peered myopically at his notes as though not able to believe what he was reading.

"That's right," Walter said calmly. He took the applewood box from the coffee table and offered cigarettes.

"I see that you've been operating in this town for the past two years," the officer continued. "And you're renting your home."

"That's right," Walter said carefully.

The policeman who was questioning him looked up. He was hunched forward uncomfortably in the tiny chair. "Just where did you live before you came here?" he asked.

"Yes, where did you live before?"

The other policeman was tall and thin and wore a worried expression.

Walter tapped his cigarette carefully against the side of the silver ashtray. "Why don't you tell me just why you're here, gentlemen," he said. "Then I could be more helpful."

It seemed for a moment that the larger of the two officers was going to protest, but after he had ex-

changed a glance with his companion, he said, "Tell me, Mr. Morton, have you ever sent any flowers to a man—let's see here—yes, a man in Pittsburgh, John Proutie?"

There was a long silence.

"You're not under any obligation to answer these questions," the thin officer said, "but it would certainly make things simpler."

"I'm just trying to think," Walter told him. "Proutie. Proutie. The name certainly sounds familiar."

"Don't you keep any records?" the bigger of the two men demanded impatiently.

Walter laughed boyishly. "You'll think it absurd," he said, "but no, I don't. Oh, I have papers lying around, but I'm afraid I'm terribly careless." He peered at them through his thick glasses. "You don't," he added, "have a search warrant, do you?"

"We don't *now*," the thin officer snapped, "but we could get one in a hurry."

Walter stared at the ceiling. "Proutie," he said thoughtfully. "No, I don't think I know anyone by that name."

The big man stared at him as though he were an insect under a microscope. That was one of the things that Walter found objectionable about the police. Whether you were in California or New Eng-

land, they all had that particular look in their eyes.

"We had a notification," the big man said slowly, "that Mr. Proutie last week received a planter box full of *Solanum nigrum*. It's a small white flower with a black berry."

"I'm familiar with the plant," Walter said stiffly.

"Sometimes called black nightshade," the thin officer added ominously.

Walter cleared his throat. "I still would like to know why you're asking me these questions," he said.

"All right, sir. This Mr. Proutie worked for a big advertising agency. He was due for a promotion—at least that's our information—and then he didn't get it. This is a man of about forty-five, and it came as quite a shock to him. He did some investigating and discovered that the man who got the position had spread some pretty dirty information about his private life. That's it."

"Well," Walter said stiffly, "this gentleman's private life may be interesting to you, but I find it a bit boring. I don't know Mr. Proutie, and I can't be particularly interested in his reputation."

"One of your brochures was found in his apartment," the thin officer said, "among his effects."

"His effects? But I thought that

he . . .” Walter’s voice tapered off.

“Yes, Mr. Morton—that he what?”

“So the man’s dead, is he?”

“Yes, Mr. Morton. He simply ate a few of the berries on that black nightshade you sent him. Someone got him to a hospital and tried to save him, but it was too late. Mr. Proutie had just time to confess that he had thought of murdering the man who got his job, but then he thought better of it and committed suicide.”

Walter stared at them. “Well,” he said, “this is simply shocking!”

“We found it very interesting,” the officer in the armchair said.

“Tell me, Mr. Morton, do you deal purely in poisonous plants?”

“What makes you think that?”

The officer pulled a brochure out of his pocket and read off a list of Latin names. “All poisonous,” he said triumphantly.

“I grow a good many things,” Walter said carefully. “If a plant is poisonous, I add a warning.”

“And these prices!” the burly officer blurted. “Five hundred dollars for this, three hundred for that. These are expensive plants, Mr. Morton.”

“I don’t like the inferences you’re making,” Walter said coldly. He rose. “I’m a good citizen, trying to make my living the best way I know how. I grow plants and I sell

them. I grow what the people want, and I ask a price that the market can stand. Is there any law against that?”

The officers glanced at one another. “There are laws about shipping plants through the mails,” one of them stated.

“I have never knowingly violated a law,” Walter told him. “If I were you I would think this matter over carefully before pursuing it.”

The tall, thin officer stared at him. “You’re helping people kill other people!” he protested. “How do you have the nerve to—”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave now,” Walter said, moving toward the door. “I have work to do.”

But he knew as they left that they would soon be back. This was always the moment that Walter hated. Not that there was much to do, for the house had been rented furnished. There was only his clothing to pack and his records to destroy.

Walter stood in the warm summer sunlight and stared at the glistening garden. He did hate to leave it. Still, there was always the sunny side. It was interesting to see new places. And he had been reading just the other night that there was no place better for growing *Jatropha manihot* than Florida.

*'Tis said, "Each is given a bag of tools," but the individual makes of them a stumbling-block or a stepping-stone.*

# TOO MANY SHERIFFS



It was Friday and the annual convention of the State Sheriffs Association was all set to swing into its last day of business before adjournment and the election of next year's

slate of officers. There to transact, oversee, or simply kibitz on this business were one hundred and forty-three sheriffs, two hundred and thirteen deputies, assorted families, critics, and courthouse denizens ranging from file clerks all the way up to a pair of superior court judges.

It was a couple of minutes before nine o'clock when my fellow deputy, Jerry Sealey, let me out in front of the Stardust Motel's coffee shop. Jerry drove on to the convention hall, a block up the beach.

Charlene poured me a cup of steaming coffee. "Last day, huh?"

"Right. And I can't say I'm sorry. This many sheriffs in one place is worse than a store full of women at a clearance sale."

She smiled and slid the sugar and cream down the counter. "And just what does an old bachelor like you know about women and clearance sales, Pete Miller?"

"Us old bachelors know more'n you think. That's how we manage to stay old bachelors."

"You think Sheriff Peavy might get elected president of the association?"

I shrugged. "You know Dan Peavy. If he'd just butter up some of those old buzzards he might—"

That was when it happened, right in mid-sentence with my coffee cup halfway to my mouth. It was one of those things that just couldn't happen—which, I guess, was exactly why it did.

"Pete!" Charlene exclaimed. "That's the bank alarm!"

A bell was ringing for all it was worth, and the only bell in the village was the one at the bank. But it couldn't be happening, I told my-

self. Who would be crazy enough to try robbing the bank with nearly four hundred law enforcement officers barely a block away?

I dropped the cup and sprinted for the door. It was happening, all right. A car was streaking off up the street, and old man Jonathan Somerville, the bank manager, was standing in the doorway of the bank shaking his fists and yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Help! Robbers! Help! The bank's been robbed!"

Somerville was definitely not the joking sort. In fact, the only thing that brought so much as a smile to his thin lips was the mention of compound interest, or foreclosures.

The instant he looked back in the direction of the motel and saw me he bellowed all the louder. "Miller! Get after 'em! They robbed the bank!"

The car squealed around the corner at the end of the street and disappeared beyond the Baptist Church, making for the mainland. I yanked my revolver out of the holster, but there wasn't anything to shoot at but the Baptist Church, so I stuck it back in.

Somerville screamed. "Go get 'em, you idiot!"

"In what!" I yelled back. I was running toward the bank, and as I drew up to Somerville he jerked out a set of car keys and threw

them at me. I caught the ring.

"Take my car!" he bellowed, pointing toward the old sedan that the populace of St. Lucy Island recognized as readily as its owner.

"They won't get far," I said, trying to calm the man. "At least not if you put The Plan into effect."

"The plan? Oh! *The Plan!* Good heavens I forgot!"

Just then, a svelte, trim, emerald-eyed young woman came out of the bank behind Somerville. I whipped off my cap. "'Morning, Louella." It was Miss Louella Mims, whose official title was assistant cashier, but whose unofficial and far more fitting sobriquet was simply The Bank Bunny.

"Good morning, Pete. I've just called Cap'n Ned and put The Plan into operation."

"Good thinking, my dear," sighed the manager.

The Plan, worked out by Gual County's Sheriff Dan Peavy, was simply this: in the event of a robbery the drawbridge tender was to be called as quickly as possible; the drawbridge would be raised at once, thereby marooning all automobiles on the island until such time as the bridge was lowered again. Bandits, Dan Peavy reasoned, could not flee indefinitely on the seven or eight miles of road on the island.

"I better get after them anyhow,"

I said. "Somebody send for Dan."

But the word had already reached the convention hall. A battalion of lawmen, some running, others in cars, descended on the bank from the convention hall. In the lead was the vast form of Sheriff Jason Rumble, of metropolitan Fulda County, upstate.

"Which way did they go?" he boomed. Somerville pointed, and without a pause Rumble turned and tapped two men with a forefinger. "Get moving, boys! Wait a minute—what kind o' car were they in?"

Somerville's mouth opened. "Sedan . . . black . . . no . . . green . . . maybe a coupe . . ."

"It was black," I said. "A two-door."

Miss Louella Mims stepped forward and unfolded a piece of note paper. "It was a 1965 dark blue Chevy, four-door sedan, white sidewalls, license 23-466. There were two men, both fairly heavy-set, wearing dark trousers, turtle-neck white shirts, sun glasses, hats—" she paused and looked up with a smile, "—and blue tennis shoes."

"Get going!" Rumble commanded his two deputies.

"They got practically every dime the bank had," wailed Somerville, "not to mention twenty-three dollars of my *own* money!"

My boss, Sheriff Dan Peavy, managed to squirm his way

through the mob about them. "How much did they get, Somerville?"

"Lord knows! Everything—"

"It's about \$67,000, Sheriff Peavy," said Louella. "You see, being Friday we had several payrolls on hand. The reason the money was here instead of at the mainland branch was because all these officers were here at the convention, and it just didn't seem possible that anybody would rob *this* bank."

Dan Peavy pushed a hand through his thatch of snow-white hair. "Sure does seem peculiar, don't it? I wonder just why . . ." His eyes narrowed suddenly. "The Plan?"

Louella took care of that," I assured him.

Down the street a little yellow sports car came around the corner by the church and pulled up at the Post Office next door to the bank. Two collegiate types climbed out and gazed curiously toward the throng at the bank.

Sheriff Jason Rumble spotted them and called out, "You boys step here a moment!"

They sauntered over and the tall, skinny one said, "What's up, Pops? What's the mob scene?"

"Bank's been robbed," said Rumble. "You boys just come from the mainland, huh? Did you happen to

see a dark blue sedan with a couple of guys in it?"

The boys looked at each other, shrugged, and turned back toward Rumble. "Negative, Dad. That woulda been the bad guys making off with the ill-gotten gains?"

"You sure you didn't see 'em?" puzzled Rumble.

The sheriff from little Bean County, on the west side of the state, nudged Rumble and whispered, "Don't you think you should let Peavy handle this, Jason? After all, this is his county."

"Eh? What's that? Oh, *Peavy!* Where is he? Didn't see him."

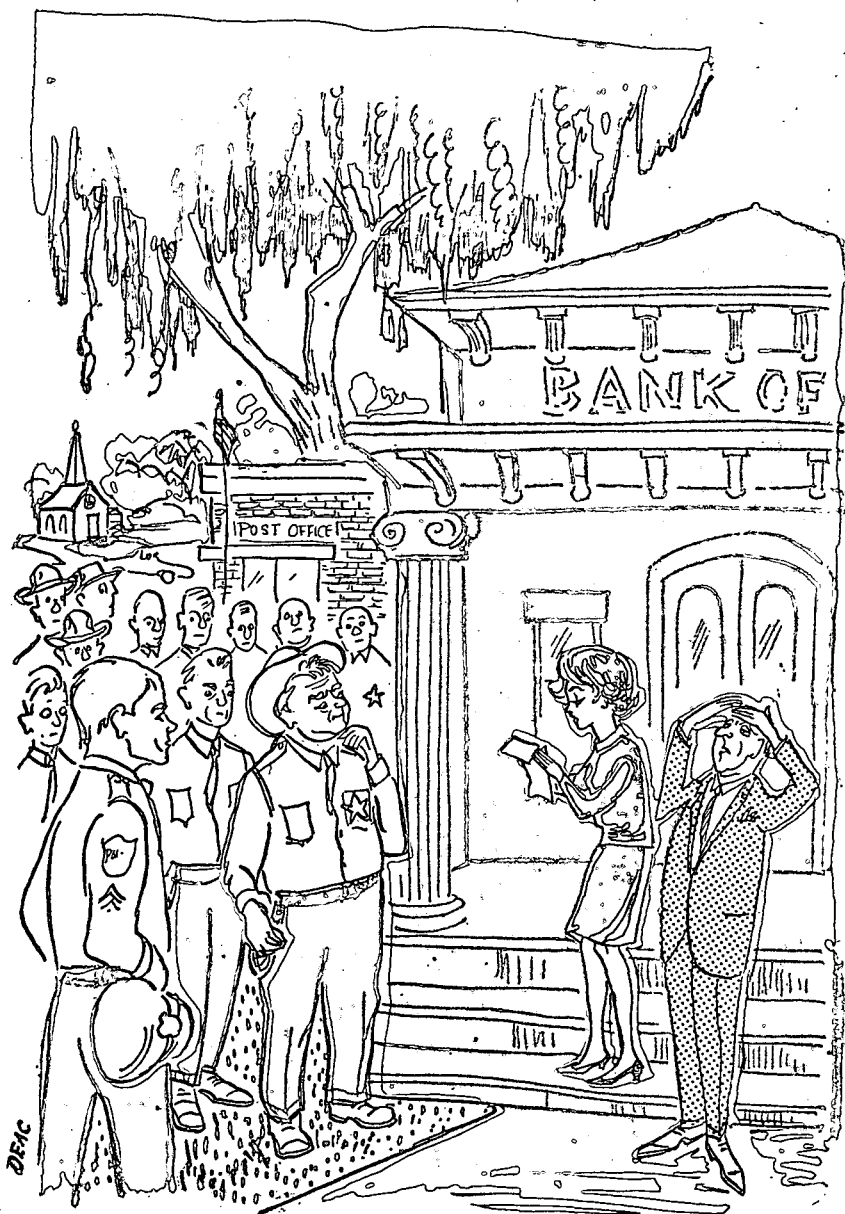
Dan Peavy was just coming out of the bank. "Here I am, Jason. I was just phoning the FBI in Savannah. They've got a couple of men leavin' up there in just a little while."

"Not that we really need 'em," muttered Rumble. "Fact is, Peavy, in the past two years I've had twenty-two bank jobs up in my county. Don't suppose you ever had anything like this down here in the boondocks before, have you?"

Dan scratched his cheek slowly. "Come to think of it, we did. Back in '31, I think it was. Bad luck for the bandits, though. The bank was all set to declare bankruptcy that same mornin'."

"I see," Rumble said. "Well, I've





got the experience, Peavy, so if you got no objections I'm gonna send some men after them guys right now."

"Go right ahead, Jason," Dan said. "It's just that a couple o' things kinda puzzle me about this here—"

Rumble pushed him aside and turned to the throng of lawmen crowding about the entrance to the bank. "Alright men!" he thundered. "You got the description of that car. They're headed for the drawbridge, and the bridge tender's been alerted and is supposed to haul the span up. Let's get after 'em!"

Everybody broke for the cars like it was the start of a sports car race. Cars with various official markings on them, some with huge chromed sirens and lights, and with whip-lash aerials, began to maneuver about the street. Tires screamed. Motors raced. The Franklin County car smashed broadside into the brand new black and white one from Donovan County and a hot argument ensued. Meanwhile, a dozen or more broke from the pack and went careening around the corner at the end of Front Street, past the Baptist Church, and out of sight.

I cupped my hand to Dan Peavy's ear. "Dan, this thing's going to get out of hand, if you know

what I mean. You haven't forgotten that Jason Rumble is shooting for the presidency of the association too, have you? I mean, if you let him run the show on this, it ain't going to help your cause."

Dan pulled thoughtfully at the end of his gnarled nose. "Maybe, Pete. You're figurin' something like too many cooks spoil the soup, huh?"

"Actually," I said caustically, "I was thinking more along the lines of too many chiefs and not enough Indians."

"Look at it this way, Pete," he said. "If those bandits took off thinkin' they was going to make it to the mainland, they're as good as back here right now. On the other hand, maybe they figured this thing smarter'n we know. If that's the case, we got to start usin' less runnin' around and more brains."

We had gone back into the bank and Dan stepped to the front window and looked out. Quite a few tourists were mixed in with the local people outside. Toward the back of the crowd two girls in just about the littlest bikinis, allowed by law had stopped and were talking to Deputy Jerry Sealey. They each carried a large beach bag, and after a moment they sauntered on in the direction of the beach. Jerry stared after them, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down with satisfac-

tion, and whistled his approval.

Across Front Street where the St. Lucy Golf Course parallels the street, a pair of golfers and their wives had stopped to watch the confusion across the way.

Suddenly, cars came streaming back around the Baptist Church, jolting up as close to the bank as they could get. I recognized Jason Rumble's chief deputy as the first man out. He spotted his chief and ran toward him.

"Found the getaway car, Jason! They stashed it behind some palms not more'n five hundred yards from the corner there. Must have had another car there, and far as we can find out, nobody's seen it."

Rumble smacked his fists together disgustedly. "Mighta known it. It's the same M.O. they all use. Steal one car, then switch soon as they get outta sight. All right, how about the drawbridge tender? Any cars at all try to get across?"

"I stationed four men at the bridge. Nothing tried to get by yet."

Rumble took that in, frowning, then said, "Okay, let's go take a look at the getaway car."

"We going with 'em, Dan?" I asked.

Dan Peavy shook his head "You go with 'em, Pete. I got some things I want to check out."

Jerry's eyes popped. "You mean

you ain't even going to look at the getaway car? Dan . . ." He cut his eyes around at the throng of lawmen, then took hold of Dan Peavy's elbow and steered him into a quiet corner. "Dan," Jerry said, as if he was talking to a four year old, "this thing is important, you understand that, don't you? You're just—just *lettin'* that windbag Jason Rumble run the whole show! You know what it's gonna look like if he wraps this robbery up, right here in *our* county—"

"Pete," Dan broke in, "take Jerry along with you."

"But—"

"Get goin', both of you." Dan looked around the bank. "Now where's Louella Mims? I gotta talk to that girl." He saw her and before Jerry could start yakking again, he was off.

Jerry stared after him, disgust emanating from his every pore. "I just never thought I'd see the day when Dan Peavy wouldn't even put up a fight!"

"I don't think you've seen the day yet," I said. "Now, come on, let's get to work."

A dozen or more cars lined the shoulder of the road some five hundred yards past the Baptist Church. Jerry pulled to a stop at the end of the line and we hurried through the palm and palmetto thicket along with several others arriving

on the scene. We soon came upon a crowd standing around a dark blue Chevy.

"They must of had another car stashed here," the sheriff of Moon County opined.

"Trouble is," noted a deputy from Butler County, "the ground is too hard to hold a tire print."

"What's through the thicket there?" asked Sheriff Jason Rumble.

"About fifty feet through there and you come out on the golf course," Jerry said.

"You two boys have a look-see through there," Rumble said to Jerry and me.

Jerry started to bridle, but I slapped him on the back and gave him a shove in the right direction. "Right away, Sheriff."

As we headed through the thicket Jerry grumbled, "I don't like takin' orders from that big blow-hard, Pete. He ain't got no right orderin' us around!"

"Forget it. Right now let's concentrate on keeping Gual County in on the case."

We broke into the clear, emerging at about the middle of the third hole of the St. Lucy Golf Course. The tee was to our right, the green to the left. A couple of fat women in shorts were trudging up the fairway, pausing every so often to take another cut at the ball. Their hus-

bands trailed along in an electric cart.

"Don't see how they could have come this way, Pete," Jerry said. "Plenty of folks playin', and somebody would have seen 'em."

The foursome came past, eyeing us curiously. Seeing my badge, one of the men said, "Heard the bank was robbed. Shouldn't you fellows be chasing the robbers?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose so. Come on Jerry."

We scrambled back through the thicket and reported to Sheriff Rumble.

"Well," he said, "I reckon we can scratch the golf course angle. There was another car here, anyhow. You can see where the grass was mashed down, even if it ain't enough to make a tire print."

"They had three choices of where to go," I said. "The main road goes to the drawbridge in one direction, and back to the village in the other. Then there's the North End cutoff about a mile toward the bridge. That doesn't go anywhere except out to the fishing camps."

"Fishing camps?" Rumble said, brightening perceptibly. "They got boats at fishing camps! And a boat can get you off this island as good as a car can!" He smacked his ham-like hands together. "That's *it*! Come on, men!"

With that, everybody headed

back for the cars at a gallop. Rumble climbed in with us. "You boys know the road. Lead the way!"

"We better report in to Sheriff Peavy," Jerry said.

"*Blast Peavy!*" thundered Rumble. "You can't stand around twiddling your thumbs in a case like this! You got to act! Now get this car moving!"

Minutes later we were racing out the North End road at eighty miles an hour, a long line of police cars in our wake.

Sheriff Rumble or no Sheriff Rumble, I tried to contact Dan Peavy on the radio. "Guale County Car One calling Car Two. Car One to Car Two. Come in, Dan."

"He probably ain't got his car radio on," Jerry said.

But at that moment there came the familiar drawl of our intrepid leader. "Car Two to Car One. What is it, Pete?"

I reported what had transpired at the scene of the abandoned getaway car. "We're heading out towards the fishing camps now. Sheriff Rumble figures the crooks might be escaping by boat."

"That's good thinkin'," Dan replied. "You say you boys walked through the woods to the golf course, huh? How far would you say the car was from the course?"

I pressed the microphone button. "About fifty feet or so. Real

thick undergrowth, too. But you can forget about the golf course, Dan. It's pretty crowded, and they couldn't have barged out onto the course with a sackful of money without somebody seeing 'em."

"Maybe," he said. "Well, keep me posted on what you find out at the fishin' camps. Or what you don't find. Car Two out."

A few moments later, Jason Rumble leaned forward and crossed his arms on the back of the seat. "How long has old Peavy been sheriff down here?"

"Forty years or more," I said.

He leaned back and plucked a big black cigar from his breast pocket. "It figures. Just a damn good thing this happened when it did. Yes sir, a damn good thing."

Which brought my thinking back to Dan Peavy's reaction at the bank, and my first thought when I heard the alarm start ringing. Just why would any halfway sane bank robber pull a stunt like this with all these cops around?

I got a possible answer to that question a few minutes later when we pulled into Tuck's Fishing Camp, the first of three camps on the river at the north end of the island. After twenty-odd cars full of sheriffs and deputies had come slewing and sliding into his parking area, and when eighty or ninety lawmen were running around

asking questions of anybody they could find, Tuck pulled me aside, laughing for all he was worth. "Pete," he managed, "I ain't seen anything like this since the Keystone Cops stopped makin' movies."

"How many boats have left here in the last fifteen or twenty minutes?" I asked him.

"One. Lester Jagels and his boy. Bank's been robbed, huh? How about that!"

I told Sheriff Rumble, and the posse remounted and roared on toward the Good Luck Camp.

"Sure," said old Charley Bean in answer to Rumble's question. "There was a couple of fellas about like the ones you described. They come in that car right over yonder, and come to think of it, they did seem in right smart of a hurry."

"They have anything with 'em?" Rumble asked. "Like a sack, or maybe a suitcase?"

Bean pondered that, then shook his head. "Had a couple of fishing rods, tackle box . . ." His face lighted up. "By golly, they did have something with 'em!"

"Big enough to hold \$67,000?" Rumbled pressed.

"Can't rightly say. I ever seen that much money, mister. But I reckon that big ice chest coulda held that, and then some."

"Which way'd they go?"

"Up toward the highway bridge—" Bean started, pointing.

"Into the boats, men!" the big man boomed, brushing Bean aside. "Get after 'em! You, Miller, can you run one of them boats?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then get at it!"

Bean grabbed his arm. "Now hold on just a minute! I *rent* them boats! How many you wanta rent?"

Rumble shoved him aside again. "Somebody talk to this lamebrain. We got to catch them bank robbers!"

Bean was still voicing strong objections to anyone who would look at him as I cranked up the first outboard we came to and, with Sheriff Rumble, headed toward the highway bridge.

I was beginning to think I had figured Jason Rumble wrong. It made sense. With all the roads being watched, it would be simple to slip away in a boat. The bandits could have a third car waiting on the highway, and off they would go, with everybody still beating the bushes on St. Lucy Island for them.

"There they are, Miller!" Rumble shouted. "Dead ahead! Pour the coal to this thing!"

We had been fortunate in hopping into a boat with a twenty-

five horse-power motor, and the gap ahead closed rapidly, just as the gap astern widened steadily between us and the awesome armada of sheriffs plowing upstream.

Rumble whipped out his pistol and motioned for me to do the same. "I'll fire a warning shot over their heads." He squeezed off a round and the two men in the boat spun around, staring back at us.

*"Halt in the name of the law!"* Rumble roared.

The man at the motor cupped one hand to his ear quizzically and Rumble took a deep breath and bellowed the command again, punctuating it by firing two more rounds over their heads. The men looked at each other, then cut the

engine. We sped up alongside their boat with drawn pistols.

"Okay, boys," Rumble roared with satisfaction. "The jig is up!"

"Who the devil are you?" asked the man at the engine. "And what's the meaning of this?"

"There's the cooler, Miller," Rumble said, pointing into the bow of the boat. "Keep your gun on 'em and I'll check it."

"You've made some kind of mistake," said the other man. "I don't know who you think we are, but I am Judge Henry Coombs and this is Judge John P. Withers. And now, you'll explain this peculiar behavior of yours—"

"Knock it off, mister," Rumble snapped. "You ain't talking your way out of this."

Several other boats caught up to us just then, and as Jason Rumble ripped the lid off the cooler and stared down at a large supply of iced beer, one of the sheriffs stood up in his boat and took off his hat.

"Well, good morning, Judge Coombs! Judge Withers! You happen to see which way that other boat went?"

Rumble had very little to say all the way back to the village. The line of cars resembled a funeral procession more than a posse as it came down Front Street.

Dan Peavy did not seem surprised when we reported the fre-



netic activities of the last half hour. "Let's run over to the golf club for a minute, boys," he said.

In the car, before either Jerry or I could ask a question, Dan Peavy said, "How big a bundle do you fellas think \$67,000 would make?"

"How big?" Jerry said. "Why . . . plenty big! But what's that got—"

Dan looked at a piece of scratch paper. "The money was here to make payrolls. There were 2000 twenties, 2000 tens, 1000 fives, and 2000 ones. Total of 7000 bills, all in packs of a hundred bills. All that, mind you, would fit in a box less'n twelve by twelve by ten inches. And it wouldn't weigh but about sixteen pounds."

"Very interesting," Jerry said drily. "Now then, how come we're going to the golf club?"

Dan ignored the question. Instead, he said, "Pete, you play golf. How long does it take to play a round of eighteen holes?"

"Depends on lots of things."

"Well, let's say on the average, for four players."

I shrugged. "Around four hours, give or take a half hour."

Dan did some figuring on the paper. "'Bout thirteen minutes a hole?"

"Some holes are long, some short. What are you getting at?"

We reached the clubhouse, parked the car, and Jerry and I trailed Dan Peavy into the golf shop. Birdie Gilstrap, the pro, met us.

"I thought you boys would be out after the bank robbers," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"That's what we're doin' here," Dan said. "Lookin' for bank robbers. You got a register or something that people sign when they play the course?"

Birdie looked at Dan strangely, then nodded. "Yeah. Here it is right here. Gives the name, address, and starting time."

Dan's eyes scanned the list. "What number is the hole that runs along Front Street, across from the bank?"

"That's Number Five," Birdie said, his puzzlement matched only by mine and Jerry's.

"Five," Dan mused. "Five times thirteen—then it'd take about an hour to get to that green after startin'?"

"Just about that."

"So, somebody that started at a little after eight o'clock would get to that green a little after nine." He stabbed a gnarled finger down on the registration book. "That'd be these folks right here."

Birdie craned his neck around. "Mr. Terwiliger and Mr. Divine and their wives. Right. They



crossed over and are playing the back nine holes now."

"What about these people who were playin' right in back of 'em?"

Birdie read the names. "Tom Phips and his regular foursome. They're local guys. Fact is, they're in the grill room playing gin rummy right now. They never go more'n nine holes."

"I'd like a word with 'em," Dan said.

"Now, look, Sheriff Peavy, these folks couldn't have had anything to do with robbing the bank."

"We're wastin' time, Gilstrap," Dan said.

"Okay, follow me." We walked on through the shop, through a swinging door, and into the grill. Four men were sitting at a table playing cards.

Dan paused at the edge of the table. "You men were playin' right behind two men and two women, weren't you?"

"That's right, Sheriff," one of them said. "Why?"

"Could you describe the men? I mean, how they were dressed?"

"Well, now, let me think. One of 'em had on pale blue shorts, a yellow shirt, and a blue cap."

"That's right," agreed one of the other men.

"And the other guy was wearing red slacks, a chartreuse tee shirt, and a pink cap."

"Okay," Dan said. "Now then, try to remember just what they did on the third hole."

The fellow's eyes popped, and he looked at the pro as if to ask whether Sheriff Peavy mightn't have slipped his trolley. All Birdie managed was a shrug.

"They just *played* the hole, Sheriff," he said. "That's all."

"Did both men go into the woods on that hole?" Dan inquired.

"They sure did! Fact is, those fellows must have lost a hundred balls. Always in the woods—"

Dan broke in. "Exactly where did they go into the woods on that hole?"

"About halfway down the fairway, on the left side—"

Dan didn't let him finish. "That's got to be it! Come on, boys! I think I see some daylight on this case."

As we scrambled back into the car the shortwave radio began to blare. "This is Sheriff Rumble. We're headed for the airstrip. A car with two men answering the description of the bank robbers was seen five minutes ago headed for—"

Dan reached forward and clicked off the set.

"How do you know that ain't the robbers Rumble is chasin'?" Jerry demanded. "Look, Dan, Ja-

son Rumble may be a loudmouth and all that, but he did have twenty-two bank robberies in his county and—"

"Jerry," Dan said, "did Rumble mention anything about how many of them robberies he's solved?"

"Well, no. But that don't mean he don't know anything about bank robbers."

"Right. It don't. But let's us concentrate on trying to solve one. If I'm wrong about this, I'll be the first to admit it."

"Wrong about *what*?" Jerry shrilled.

"You boys ever thought about what might happen if, instead o' runnin' away from the law, the crooks ran back towards 'em? I'm wonderin' if maybe that ain't what we got on our hands here."

We had reached Front Street again, and Dan Peavy pointed ahead. "Drop me at the bank. I want you fellas to go on to the Stardust Motel and pick up those two boys in the yellow sports car."

"The kids who stopped at the Post Office just after the robbery?" I said.

"Right. I kept an eye on 'em when they drove off; and that's where they went."

"How could they have anything to do with it?" Jerry asked.

"Never mind that now, just go

get 'em. I'll be in the Post Office."

We drove down Front Street to the motel, spotted the little yellow sports car parked in front of one of the units, and knocked at the door. A moment later it opened and a young man peered curiously out at us.

"Who is it, Eddie?" came a voice from inside the room.

"It's the fuzz," said Eddie.

The other youth appeared behind him. "You guys must have the wrong place."

"Sheriff Peavy would like to have a word with you," I said.

"We already told him we didn't see no car. Didn't I hear you gumshoes found it stashed in the woods?"

I nodded. "The sheriff still wants a word with you."

"Are we under arrest?"

I sighed. "Not unless you want to be."

"Let's go with 'em, Harry. Don't you know you're supposed to cooperate with the law?"

We all climbed into the patrol car and cruised back to the Post Office. The two youths looked at each other quizzically. "What's with the Post Office?" said Eddie. "I thought it was the bank that got knocked over?"

"You'll have to ask the sheriff," I replied truthfully.

Just then the motorized posse

came rolling in from its run out to the airstrip. The frown on Sheriff Jason Rumble's face told the story.

"What are you boys up to?" he asked. "Where's Peavy?"

Dan stepped out of the Post Office. "Here I am, Jason. Pete, bring those two young fellas in here."

We went into the building, and Rumble and several dozen other lawmen drifted in behind us. Dan Peavy walked over to the mail window where Bert Neely, the local postmaster, was standing behind the counter.

Dan nailed the two youths with a gimlet eye. "You boys mail a package here this morning?"

"What business is that of yours, Pops? This here's the U.S. mail, and it ain't any concern of yours," said Harry.

Dan Peavy nodded and looked around at Neely. "Let's see the box, Bert."

The postmaster lifted a box up onto the counter. On the side was lettered *Old South Pecan Pralines — World's Best, Bar None! 15 lbs.*

"Peavy," muttered Jason Rumble, "what the devil are you doing? Have you lost your mind?"

"Maybe. How about it, boys? You mail this box o' pralines?"

The youths cut a quick glance at each other. "Okay, Pops," said Eddie. "So what. Any law against

mailing some goodies to dear old Grandma?"

"Depends on what the 'goodies' are."

"Dan," said Jerry in a desperate whisper, "let's forget about this whole thing. Maybe you oughta take a vacation, even. You ain't had one in—"

Dan shoved him gently aside. "Bert," he said, "this package is third class material. Can't you open a third class package for inspection if you want to?"

"Yep, sure can."

"Then how about checkin' this box right now."

Rumble grinned. "Peavy, I hope you realize you're gonna make yourself the laughingstock of this convention. Do you really believe the loot from the bank robbery is in that little box?"

A murmur swept through the crowd that had grown by leaps and bounds, and now overflowed out into the street.

Dan replied by looking at Bert Neely. "Open it up."

Bert whipped out a penknife, looked around at his audience like a man about to push the plunger on a charge of dynamite, and sliced the brown paper tape. "Here goes!" He pulled back the cardboard flaps. Everybody leaned forward, tense. There before our eyes were row on row of dark, caramel-

ly pecan pralines. A groan and several giggles rippled through the throng.

Jerry winced and, covered his eyes with one hand.

"Nothin' but candy . . ."

"Nuts . . ."

"Old Dan finally slipped his trolley . . ."

"Too bad, Peavy," boomed Jason Rumble in high spirits. "Can't win 'em all, though. I recollect my first bank robbery—"

Dan Peavy pushed the box of pralines to one side and leaned over the mail counter. His thick white eyebrows shot up. "What's that right yonder, Neely? Ain't that another praline box just like this 'un?"

The postmaster looked around, then scratched his head. "Well, I'll be—how'd that get there! You know what, I'll bet Ella Jane took that in when I stepped out for coffee a while ago. Yes, sir, I'll just bet that's what happened."

"Come on, man!" Dan said testily. "Let's have a look in it!"

Neely frowned. "Or maybe this is the one Ella Jane took in and that's the one these young fellas mailed." He hoisted the second box up onto the counter, picked up the knife, and slit the tape.

At the same instant Eddie and Harry bolted for the door, only to wind up in the arms of several

sheriffs, including Jason Rumble. Neely yanked back the flaps of the box, and a gasp went through the crowd. Revealed in all their glory were stacks of lovely green currency, side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

The FBI agents arrived a few minutes after that, and as we deposited the money on Mr. Somerville's desk, Sheriff Jason Rumble asked the inevitable question.

"It beats me, Peavy. How the devil did you crack this thing?"

"Well," said Dan, never one to rub salt in a man's wounds, "I guess havin' some local knowledge is where I had it over you, Jason. You see, the first thing I did was call Cap'n Ned at the drawbridge. He said no little yellow car came across the bridge before the bank robbery, so I got to wonderin' where those two young fellas came from. After the getaway car was found, it all started fitting into place."

"All *what* sorta started fitting into place?" asked Jerry.

"How the crooks planned to pull this thing off with the island crawling with lawmen. Which reminds me, somebody better get over to the golf course and pick up the two men that robbed the bank."

"The *golf* course!" thundered Rumble. "What in blazes are they

doing on the golf course? What—”

“Playin’ golf,” said Dan with a grin. He looked at his watch. “They oughta be on just about the fifteenth hole. Two men and two women, goin’ by the names of Terwiliger and Divine.”

Sheriff Rumble nodded to his deputies. “Get cracking, boys! Bring ’em in!”

Dan Peavy resumed his explanation. “Here’s the way I figure it. The two men that robbed the bank started off on the golf course with the two women at about eight o’clock. Somewhere on the first hole, the two of ’em went into the woods after a lost ball. The folks playin’ behind ’em saw two men come back outta the woods, dressed the same as the two that went in. Except it *wasn’t* the ones that went in. It was the two young fellas. From a distance the men in back of ’em couldn’t tell the difference. The two bandits made a quick clothes change, got into the blue Chevvy, drove to the village and robbed the bank, and drove back to where the car was found. The golfers had reached that hole,

the third hole. The yellow car was hidden there in the thicket, the two young fellas went into the woods, changed clothes again, put the loot in the praline box, and then we saw ’em drive up in front of the post office just as innocent as you please. They mailed the money, and even if we searched every car on the island the money would have gone on unhindered. And the two men who robbed the bank were in just about the unlikeliest place on the island, the golf course.”

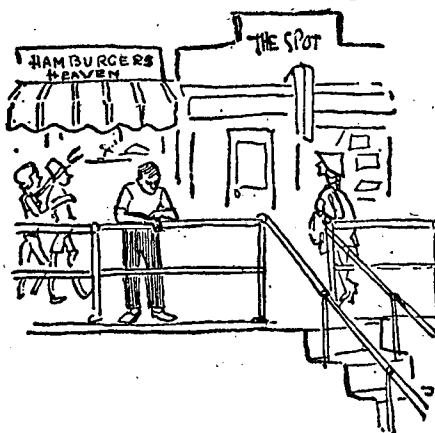
One of the FBI agents shook his head admiringly. “Pretty smooth, Sheriff Peavy. Pretty smooth, indeed!”

After that, the Sheriffs Association Convention ended on a positive note. Dan Peavy went in as president on a landslide, and got a standing ovation to boot. I suspect that Jason Rumble himself might have voted for Dan after the way things went.

As for me, I spent a very pleasant hour counting \$67,000 with Miss Louella Mims, the Bank Bunny.



*The reader might keep in mind that a kite was an integral part of an experiment to attract electricity.*



**H**E USED to see her on the beach almost every morning, during the early months of summer, flying that great orange and black kite with the twining dragon upon it. Sometimes he'd stand by the railing and watch her, remembering the children he'd seen in Japan after the war. Then they'd flown their dragon kites amidst the rubble of bombed Tokyo buildings, when it was the lone pleasure remaining to the young of a conquered land.

The girl reminded him of it,

even though she was no longer a child, but had the smoothly tanned legs and body of a young woman. He wondered why she flew the kite each day, and decided to ask her sometime.

It was toward the end of Au-

# THE GIRL with the DRAGON KITE

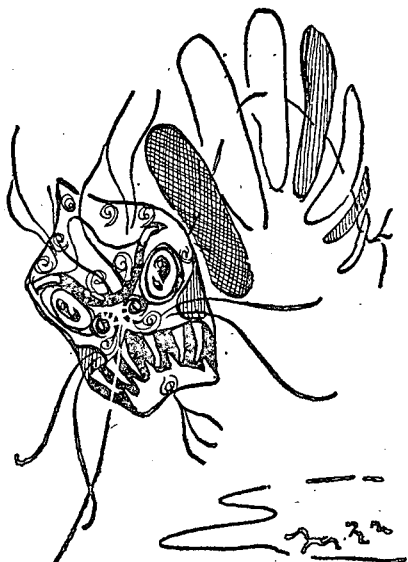
By Edward D. Hoch

gust, on a morning when she was out there alone, that he finally strolled across the sand to speak to her. "I've been watching you all summer," he said. "You're out here almost every morning, flying that kite."

She turned and smiled at him. "I like to get a tan, but I can't stand just sitting on the sand with a book. This gives me something to do."

He supposed it was as good an answer as any.

Greger was his name, and he could be found almost any day along Beachfront Avenue, watching, walking, talking now and



then to people like the little shopkeepers and the vacationers and the girl with the dragon kite. Some people thought he was a cop.

"Morning, Mr. Smedlick. How's business?"

"Hello, Greger. You're around early today."

Smedlick ran a little movie theatre on Beachfront, a shabby place that showed nudist films and imported sex movies six days a week. On Sundays it was closed, but any other day the place was likely to be half filled from noon until its midnight closing. Greger bought a

ticket and found a seat in the last row.

It was just noon and the picture was starting. Ahead of him he could see the scattering of patrons—all men, all sitting alone. He paid little attention to the flickering images on the screen. He was looking for something else. After a time he got up and went outside to the ticket booth where Smedlick was busy adding up a column of figures.

"The week's profits?" Greger asked.

"What? Oh, you startled me, Greger. Picture not very good?"

"Too hot in there. You should get your air conditioning fixed."

"I know," Smedlick said, and bent his balding head once more over the figures. He wore thick glasses and his false teeth fit badly. He never seemed interested in the movies he showed, but only in the money the box office took in.

"Seen anybody new around the neighborhood?" Greger asked casually.

"You're always asking me that. They come and they go, Greger. They come and they go."

He walked away from the theatre, heading down Beachfront toward the string of little bars, the hotdog and custard stands that dotted the area. Somebody shouted a greeting from a passing car and

he turned to wave. The summer had made him a familiar figure in the area.

Once he paused at a newsstand to glance at the display of local morning papers. He chose one that headlined a sex murder in a nearby suburb and read it carefully over the sandwich and coffee that made up his lunch.

"That makes three in the last six months," the counterman said, swabbing the space in front of Greger with a damp rag. "Girl's not safe on the streets anymore."

Greger mumbled something and went on eating. Presently he folded up his paper and continued strolling down the street. His next stop was the After Five Cafe which opened at one, in spite of its name. He went to the After Five Cafe at least three times each day. It was here that he encountered the girl again, this time without her kite.

"Hello there," she said, choosing the bar stool next to him.

He glanced at her, only half interested. "Where's your kite?"

"Wouldn't fit through the door. I have to take a break once in a while. Buy me a drink, huh?"

"I don't even know your name."

"It's Polly. Isn't that one heck of a name? Polly West. Want to know my dragon's name?"

"Does he have one?"



She crinkled her face into a smile, showing an unexpected dimple under one eye. "No, but I'd make up one for you."

"Live around here?" He signaled the bartender for two beers.

"I have an apartment for the summer. Really I'm subleasing it from a friend who's in Europe. What's your name?" All at once, without drawing a breath.

"Greger."

"Just that?"

"Just that. Nothing more."

She lit a cigarette and sipped the foam off her beer. "You've been around all summer, haven't you?"

"Off and on," he admitted.

"I've seen you watching me. Even before you asked about the kite. I asked Sammy who you were." Sammy Carp was one of the neighborhood characters, an appliance repairman.

"What did he say?"

"He thought you were either a detective or a pusher. You know—narcotics."

Greger laughed at that. He didn't laugh often, and the sound was strange to his ears. "That's funny."

She took another sip of her beer. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Which are you, Mr. Greger?"

"Do I have to be either one?"

"No. Actually I saw you reading the paper down at the lunch counter a while ago. You seemed quite interested in that sex murder."

"What's that supposed to mean? Can't I just be an ordinary bum, a beachcomber? Do I have to be a cop or a pusher or a murderer?"

"Everybody is something, Mr. Greger."

"I stopped being something a long time ago. I retired from the human race."

"Sammy says you go into Smedlick's movie house every day. You don't seem the type, somehow."

"I could say the same thing about you. This neighborhood isn't exactly the sort where one finds a pretty girl standing on the beach flying a dragon kite."

"I suppose that's a compliment," she said with a smile.

"I suppose."

They finished their beers and left the bar together, strolling through the afternoon warmth back toward the beach where they'd first met. It could have been the beginning of something, but Greger wasn't sure. He only knew that for the first time in months he no longer looked at everyone he passed.

Two nights later, Greger visited her apartment. It was in a building facing the beach, on the fourth floor, and he was immediately im-

pressed by the spacious charm of the place. It might have been in any downtown co-op rather than here along a tired section of the city's waterfront.

"You like it?" Polly asked.

"Very much."

"My friend gets the credit. It's only mine for the summer."

They had a drink and he settled down to enjoy himself. "Who owns this place, anyway? Proctor?"

She nodded. "Actually, he's a very good landlord."

Greger had seen Proctor on the streets. He looked more like a wrestler than a landlord, but he'd always seemed pleasant enough. "Where do you work?"

"Nowhere, this summer," she answered.

"That's odd."

"I could say the same about you."

"I was in insurance till six months ago. I will get some commissions out of it, enough to live on."

He picked up his drink and walked over to where she stood by the window, gazing down at the darkened beach, the gloom broken only by the flickering of a single bonfire. It might have been started by a group of teenagers roasting hotdogs, or some wandering bums without a place to spend

the night. One never knew in this section of town.

"You can hear the water," she said, very softly.

"Yes." His breath was on her neck.

"Greger?"

"Yes." Not a question.

"Who do you think killed all those women?"

He could hardly hear her voice. "What women?"

"The ones in the newspaper. Those three women."

"There were four," he corrected, before he realized the words were out.

"What? Four?"

"One last month out in the suburbs. The police didn't connect it with the others. But it was the same man."

"How do you know that?"

"The circumstances were the same. The woman was stabbed several times, her body was found in the basement, and she was killed during the day, while her husband was at work and the children at school. I'm sure the police saw the connection, but the newspapers missed it because the address was across the county line."

"You know a great deal about the crimes," Polly West said.

"I should."

She was very close to him now, her hands behind her back, and

he felt an odd sort of malaise at her proximity. "Why should you?"

"What's this?" he said, suddenly stepping back. "What are you trying to do?" He felt oddly trapped, as in a nightmare from which there was no awakening.

"Here is the knife, Greger," she said, slowly exposing one hand, her voice a soft purr that just reached his ears. "The knife. Like the others."

"No!" He pushed himself away and ran to the door, throwing it open. As he hurried into the darkened hallway he glimpsed a face very close to his own. It was the face of a man he had never seen before, standing in the darkness of the hall, waiting.

Then he was away from it, from her, running into the street, running until he was away from them. He had never been so terrified in his life—never, at least, since that night six months ago when the first one had died.

He slept poorly that night, and when he awakened he was aware of a knocking on his door that seemed to have been going on all night. He rolled unsteadily out of bed and opened the door.

It was Sammy Carp, the repairman. "You all right? You went running by me last night like the devils were after you." He scratched his bald head. "I was

worried. Are you all right now?"

"Thanks, Sammy. I'm all right. Something I drank, I guess."

"That cheap wine down at the After Five. It gets me the same way sometimes."

"That must have been it. Thanks for your concern, anyway," Greger said, and closed the door.

After a quick shower he felt a little better, but the sight of the familiar wanderers of Beachfront Street brought it all back to him. It was not a day to face Mr. Smedlick and his dirty little movies, or the crowd at the After Five. Something had happened—almost happened—last night, and he had to find out what.

He went past the theatre to the open expanse of beach, sprinkled as always with the night's collection of empty beer cans, broken wine bottles and half-smoked cigarettes. The odor of fish was strong.

But he looked beyond these things and saw her there again, just as she always was in the morning, flying her dragon kite high above the beach, holding a tight grip against the summer wind's threat. Leaving the sidewalk he started across the sand toward her. In that instant he had the unmistakable feeling that he might never reach her alive.

Someone, somewhere, was watching him. He turned suddenly toward the apartment building, but there was nothing to be seen but the casual fluttering of a single curtain caught by the breeze. He walked on, feeling the sand as it sifted into his shoes, hearing the lap of waves against the shore.

She turned when he was almost upon her, not surprised, nor fearful, standing her ground with bare, tanned legs planted firmly apart in the sand. "Hello," she said, and the mood was broken.

"I want to talk about last night."

"What's there to say?"

"There was a man in the hallway outside your room."

"Proctor, the landlord."

"Not Proctor. I know Proctor."

She turned away. "What about it?"

"The knife. I need to know about the knife."

"There's nothing to tell, Greger. Nothing."

He took a deep breath. "All right. The first one to die, six months ago, was my wife. I came home from work and found her like that, stabbed and bleeding, near the washing machine in the basement. The police never had any clue except a pack of matches I found on the floor, from the After Five Cafe. When their leads ran out, I moved down here. I've

been living down here ever since, drinking in the After Five, talking with the people, even sitting in the back row at Smedlick's sex movies—always looking, watching for him. Watching."

"Do you think you'll know him when you see him, Greger?"

"I'll know him."

"Will he be wearing a death's head and carrying a bloody knife, Greger? Will he?"

"I'll know him. He's killed three more. He can't stop now. He has to keep it up. And sooner or later he'll come back here, to the After Five. And I'll be waiting."

"Are you sure he's not here already, Greger? Are you?"

"Who was the man in the hallway? What were you doing with that knife? Don't you see I have to know?" But he might have been talking to the wind. She had turned away, back to the great garish kite that rippled in the air above them.

As he walked away, he had the feeling of not trusting even the ground beneath his feet, as if the sand might open at any moment into a funnel-shaped pit.

"Truly this is the age of sex," Mr. Smedlick was saying later, over his nightly sandwich in the back room of the After Five. "I change my pictures once a week

and, whatever it is, I always have a crowd opening day." He thought about it and then added, "I have you every day, Greger."

"Every day." Greger lit a cigarette. "Seen any strangers around the area lately? A fellow living in Proctor's apartment house?"

Smedlick shook his head. "They come and they go. I don't keep track of them. They come and they go."

Greger left money for two beers and strolled up the street to Proctor's. The landlord, a shabby businessman who always seemed ready to turn the dogs loose on some luckless tenant, listened in silence while Greger spoke of the stranger in the hall and then shook his head.

"It might be anybody or nobody, Greger. Just a drifter, probably."

"Yeah."

"I gotta go now. Sammy's coming to fix the washing machine. The troubles of the landlord never cease."

Greger headed back toward the After Five. He glanced once at the cluttered beach, but there was no sign of Polly or her kite.

He was drinking more these days, as the frustrations of the summer mounted. Thinking back now, he wondered why he had ever abandoned home and friends

to start this maddening quest. It couldn't end in anything good but only, at best, in the reluctant bringing to bay of a strange, sick mind. Sometimes when he awoke in the morning, he would gaze into the mirror and wonder if his was that mind, wonder if in some forgotten moment he might have killed her and then the rest of them.

Now, draining the amber glass, he played with the matchbook in front of him on the bar, remembering that first one he'd seen on the floor near her body. A sort of clue, but only one. Was one clue ever enough? He remembered that morning, how she'd looked, the last words she'd spoken.

Something about . . . What was it Proctor had said just a while ago? Why hadn't he remembered it before, during all those days of police questioning?

Then suddenly he was running, out of the After Five, down the dirty street where people turned to stare. "Where is she?" he shouted at Proctor, seeing the landlord emptying a barrel of rubbish. "Polly West?"

"Polly? I guess she's downstairs in the laundry."

Suddenly Greger started down the stairs two at a time, knowing it couldn't happen again so soon, knowing he must be wrong,

knowing a thousand crazy thoughts that crowded his mind and fought for attention. And then he was throwing himself against the door to the laundry room, battering down the flimsy wood—and facing Sammy Carp! Sammy, standing over Polly with his bloody knife!

Greger hurled himself at Sammy then. Blinded by his fury, he missed him, landed instead against the white metal front of the washing machine. Dazed, he saw Polly helpless on the floor, and tried to pick himself up, but Sammy was again raising his murderous knife and—

There was just one shot, but it caught Sammy in the side of the neck. Turning quickly, Greger saw the nameless man from the upstairs hallway, standing in the doorway with his police revolver drawn.

Later, much later, after they'd taken Sammy's body away, Polly West said to him, "It might have been you all along, Greger. Don't you see that? We had to know. That was why I went through

that foolishness with the knife while Ned waited in the hallway."

"He was almost too late to save you today."

"I couldn't scream. I was so startled! Imagine, 'Sammy Carp!'"

"I imagined," Greger said, running a hand over his eyes. "I found my wife's body near the washing machine, but I just remembered today she'd been having trouble with it. The other women, too—all killed in their basements, during the day, by a washing machine repair man. 'Sammy Carp.'"

"You should have left it to the police, Greger. Didn't you think we'd follow up on those matches from the After Five? They had me out here flying that damned kite all summer, just to attract attention."

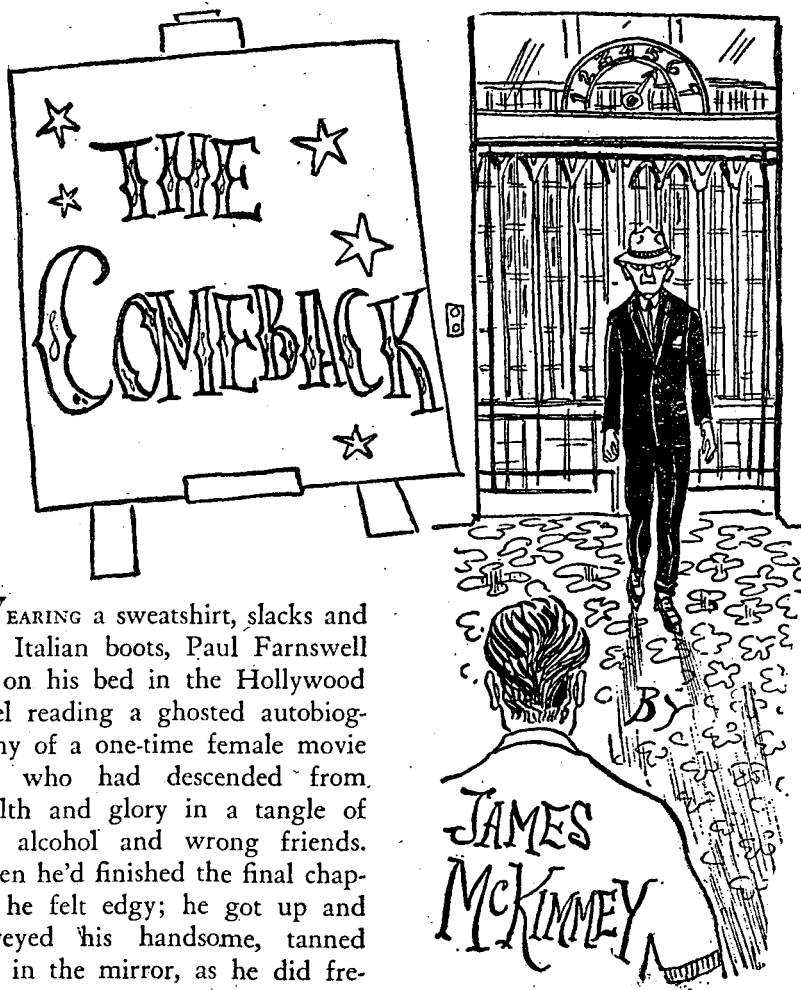
"Your kite flying attracted me—but it attracted Sammy, too."

"I'll settle for you, Greger, if you're ready to leave this seedy neighborhood."

He thought about Smedlick and the After Five and all the rest of it. Then, relaxing, he said, "Yes, I'm ready."



*It is more an observation of human nature than of anatomy that the degree of a person's effrontery is not necessarily relative to his stature.*



**W**EARING a sweatshirt, slacks and low Italian boots, Paul Farnswell lay on his bed in the Hollywood hotel reading a ghosted autobiography of a one-time female movie star who had descended from wealth and glory in a tangle of sex, alcohol and wrong friends. When he'd finished the final chapter, he felt edgy; he got up and surveyed his handsome, tanned face in the mirror, as he did fre-

quently, twisting and preening.

Turning his head to examine the condition of his black hair, he decided he would need a haircut in another week, a depressing thought, because he was into that era when every nickle counted. All he needed was a second break.

Turning from the mirror, he crossed the cheaply furnished room to look out an open window. The late-afternoon air was hot and heavy; the sky was dark with more impending April rain. The empty lot below was littered and gloomy looking.

Stay, or go down to the lobby? It was a momentous decision. He shrugged his muscled shoulders. If he went down, he would find the same old men, the same bit-part actors, the creepy desk clerk, and Jerry Mills, who would talk him into numbness; but the room was a prison. He walked to the door and slammed it behind him.

At the end of the hallway was a dirty window facing a precarious fire escape. He walked away from it over a thinning rug whose flowered pattern was a memory, passing the closed doors with old-fashioned round knobs signaling the vintage of the hotel. As he neared the elevator, there was a grinding sound, then the door opened.

Farnswell speeded his steps, but

the door closed immediately behind the figure who had stepped out. The man, wearing a worn black suit and a soiled hat fixed squarely on his head, strode mechanically toward Farnswell. The man's name was Jones, and he rented the last room down the corridor, Farnswell knew, but that was all, except that he found a familiarity in the man's features he could not identify. Jones' gray eyes looked icily at him from a pale, unanimated face.

Farnswell thumbed the elevator button and heard the start of a motor, the movement of gears. There were sounds of bumping, scraping, dragging and a dozen other indications of mechanical agony as the cubicle moved slowly upward. You put your life on the line, he mused bitterly, every time you stepped into the damned thing.

The elevator stopped with bouncing indecision, the door opened and he stepped inside to punch the lobby button. The sounds of agony resumed. Between the third and fourth floors he tensed, waiting for the familiar bounce. It came, and the elevator stopped. Farnswell drew upon his excellent command of invectives. He drummed the end of a fist against the emergency button and the elevator started moving down-



ward again. He finally achieved the lobby.

A small man, sitting like a child on one of the chrome-and-leather chairs, eyed him eagerly, and Farnswell walked across the lobby and sat down, knowing there was no use trying to evade him. "Damned elevator," he muttered.

Jerry Mills, his four-foot-high body neatly attired in slacks and sweater, pulled a long cigar from his shirt pocket and lit it. He stood up and paced in small dramatic circles, jabbing the cigar at Farnswell. "Every man has to learn to live dangerously. That's life."

Farnswell, listening to the high voice, thought everything the tiny actor did or said had to have a Ringling Brothers flashiness to it. Jerry Mills hadn't had a job in three years, but he was on stage every minute. "Philosophy," Farnswell said coolly, "from some lousy TV script."

"Don't be bitter, Farnswell," the little man said, strutting. "Take life in your hands lovingly. Enjoy." He jumped back on his chair, legs pointing out, his forty-seven-year-old face relaxing as he puffed contentedly at the cigar. "What were you doing up in your room all afternoon?"

Mills was, Farnswell decided irritably, relentlessly curious. He

did not know, now, why he'd ever picked up with him. Possibly it was because, when he'd moved into this place a month ago, he'd recognized him from small movie parts and an equally small role in a TV series that had gone up in smoke after one year. The small performer, Farnswell knew, had found interest in him because he'd discovered that Farnswell had been making \$25,000 a year as a real-estate salesman less than twelve months ago.

"Hey," Mills said, jabbing at his arm impatiently.

"All right! I was reading a book."

"What about?"

Farnswell delivered the name of the actress.

Mills snorted, clamping his teeth on the cigar. "I knew her! A bum. You know what she's doing now? Hooking, across Santa Monica Boulevard."

"That's what it said in the book," Farnswell said drily.

"She messed it up herself. Nobody else to blame." The man's voice was suddenly breathless with emotion. "It gets me when somebody blows something beautiful on account of themselves. It doesn't have to happen."

"It didn't have to happen to me either, or you; but it did."

Mills' cigar jabbed defensively.

"I'm a little guy. How many parts do they write for little guys? But I'm still in there. I already got my hands on a part. Next week. Fifteen hundred a week. That's my price."

"Sure it is."

"That's the truth!" Mills said, his voice growing louder. "Same as my residuals from the series."

"So why this dump? Why not the Hilton? How about the Ambassador downtown?"

"I got to think about longevity. Stretch it out. I'm a *little* guy. You got to wait between. Besides, this place is close to the studios. Let's grab an early dinner."

"You always want an early dinner. You eat like the Jolly Green Giant."

Mills showed a bright grin as well as two missing teeth just behind the upper front row. "I burn up energy, Farnswell. I'm a dynamo." He thumped Farnswell on the knee. "Wait while I phone my agent."

Mills slid off the chair and marched across the room to the public pay phone around the corner from the desk. Farnswell rested his elbows on the arms of his chair, touching the bridge of his nose with each forefinger, staring forward dismally. He listened to the toy-trumpet voice of Jerry Mills attempting to strike fear into

his agent, and, at the same time, imploring action. The day clerk was fumbling at the small switchboard in an attempt to take a call. Farnswell looked at the empty mail pigeonhole behind the desk. He hadn't had a letter since he'd come here, and why should he? Nobody knew he was here, including his old man in Council Bluffs.

He closed his eyes and thought of his father living in that small house in the center of town, in the heat, the storms, the cold that was the climate of Iowa. Every day during the thirty years of his life that Farnswell could remember, his father had thought about one thing: his job with the railroad across the river in Omaha. They worked him in the yards like an animal, and he loved it; it was his religion. When Farnswell's mother had died, his father had reluctantly taken two tearless hours from that job to attend the funeral. Then he'd gone back to the yards.

Later, when Farnswell had played basketball in high school and finally made All State, his father had said, "Good. You'll be in great shape when you go to work for the railroad." Instead, he'd taken a scholarship at Creighton. All the while his father had complained that he was wasting his time in college. He'd listened to

that for two years. Then he'd packed his bag and gone west.

When he was peaking for Cholly Amberson's realty company, he'd phoned his old man and told him how much he was making. His father had said, "So what's that? Same as gambling! Come on home. I can still get you on with the railroad."

He opened his eyes as Jerry Mills bounced back, tiny black shoes flashing. "Ross Hunter wants me for his next."

Farnswell stood up wearily. "Let's go."

They walked south along the busy avenue as traffic whined, whirred, and roared on the free-way behind them. Jerry Mills trotted beside him, looking happy, and Farnswell failed to slow his stride to compensate for the little man's short steps. The town, once so glamorous in so many minds, now seemed to have nothing left but old Spanish-styled homes turned into cheap rooming houses; junk clothing shops; snack bars and coffee shops serving bum food at overstuffed prices; sex movie houses. Let the tourists have it.

"Hey, Bogart!" Mills called to a slight man on the other side of the street.

The man pulled his lips back in a convincing Bogart sneer. Mills chortled. "Good actor."

"He's not working much either."

"He's bitter. Defeats himself. Bitterness is success' worst enemy."

"Where'd you get that?"

"Norman Vincent Peale or Doctor Spock. I forget which."

They were approaching the crowds on Hollywood Boulevard, and Jerry Mills suddenly darted ahead where an embarrassed young couple were attempting to pacify a screaming child. Farnswell stopped in disgust and watched Mills cavort before the startled child, doing his clown act. The child stopped screaming. The parents looked astonished. Then all three began laughing. Mills patted the child's head tenderly and danced back to Farnswell, who'd always hated children.

"I love kids!"

Yeah, Farnswell decided, because he relates to them. They turned onto Hollywood Boulevard and moved past shops with the junk clothes in the windows. Farnswell was remembering the wardrobe he'd achieved working for Cholly Amberson: a dozen tailored suits, worth two hundred and fifty each; an equal number of sport jackets and slacks; five top-coats; innumerable shirts and pairs of shoes. He only remembered that, after he'd lost the car, he'd started selling the clothes. Now, listening to an oppressive



rumble of thunder high in the dark sky, he didn't even own a raincoat. That second break had better come, and quickly.

They crossed the traffic-busy boulevard. Jerry Mills shouted and waved at a dozen people he knew. Those he didn't, but whose eyes flickered in recognition, he saluted sharply. As they neared a postal box, a beautiful brunette swung her

small sports convertible in. Farnswell stared at her, wondering how she'd react to, "Honey, I'm broke and getting broker, but how about dinner—you pay the check?"

The girl reached up with an envelope, but the car was too low for her to reach the drop slot. Jerry Mills danced forward, took the letter, dropped it in, then bowed. The girl laughed in delight, and the

small car roared off thunderously.

"You've got a regular community conscience," Farnswell said bitterly.

"You have to, if you're in the performing arts," Mills said, meaning it.

They stepped into the steamy cafeteria Mills had shown him shortly after he'd been reduced to moving into the hotel. The prices were low; the food wasn't bad; but Farnswell was thinking how a dry martini would taste in the Beverly Hills Hotel, how dinner in the Brown Derby would be.

They slid trays along the metal ramp, choosing dishes. Jerry Mills filled his. After they'd found a table, Farnswell ate without appetite.

"What are you thinking about?" Mills asked brightly.

"Jones."

"What Jones?"

"The guy in the hotel, at the end of my hall."

"That bum!" Mills, seated so low that he had to hold his arms level with his shoulders, speared at a piece of meat viciously.

"I've seen him before."

"Jail maybe."

"I've never been in jail."

"Then you saw him going in or coming out. I can smell a crook every time." He stabbed again. "I was hung up in that elevator the other day, and the bum keeps on pushing

the button in the lobby. When it finally got going, he reads me off. My fault, he says. I said to him, 'How do you think I stopped it?' And he said, 'How does a dwarf do anything?' I said, 'I'm not a dwarf, I'm just a *little* guy!' And he said, 'Tell it to Snow White.' Everybody talks about minorities. How about us little guys? We ought to have a lobby!"

"To get what done?"

"Decency, from bums like Jones."

"How does he live?"

"Peddles stuff. Pimps. How do I know? Whatever it is, it's illegal. I never miss on one like that."

Farnswell tasted his coffee. It was cold. He could con the girl in charge of the urn for a free hot one, as Mills did; but he had too much pride. He pushed his plate away and lit a cigarette, feeling black.

"What are you thinking about?" Mills asked eagerly.

"Medger."

"Nephew of the guy you were working for, the one who canned you after the guy died. I remember."

Farnswell also remembered. He'd waited until Cholly Amberson had been buried, then telephoned Cholly's lawyer to find out how much the old man had left him. The lawyer had told him that Cholly had left everything to Medger.

When he'd reported for work the

next morning, Medger, a slight kid with a weak mouth and mean eyes, had been sitting in Cholly's chair. He'd said, "For seven years I watched you kowtowing to my uncle, trying to work your way in, him fathering you along, so you figured you had this operation." The weak mouth curled. "I got to hating your guts so much I got drunk. I was going to read him off crosswise and diagonally. That would have done it, with him. Only when I got to his house, he was dead. All the time he'd willed this to me. It proves that blood is thicker than relationships with boot-lickers. Get out of here, Farnswell."

Farnswell touched his mouth stiffly. "The bum."

"Town's full of them."

Farnswell looked at Mills with angry eyes. "I built a career with that outfit. Now what? I'm down to my last hock."

"Get a job."

"Are you crazy? What kind of a job do I get? Some lousy commission-only deal? When I was making twenty-five thousand a year?"

"What's the difference? You build it back up, like you had it before."

Farnswell thought of the single suit in that small closet of his room. He'd saved one of those two-fifty models, then worn it a month ago

when he'd decided to blow for dinner in a decent restaurant on the Strip. He'd knocked off the lighted end of a cigarette and burned a hole in the jacket an inch in circumference. "No way."

"Always a way."

"How the hell can you think that way? Why do you kid yourself, Mills? Day in and day out. Unless I get a break, I've had it. You too!"

For the first time since they'd met, Farnswell saw Jerry Mills' aplomb fading. The small man's eyes flickered with a quick, unmistakable fear. The lines of his face seemed to deepen. For several seconds he appeared to be a quickly aging doll, a special-effects trick created by a studio specializing in the macabre. Then he recovered. "I've got a part next week. I swear it!"

"You're lying. To me. To yourself."

"Ross Hunter wants me for his next!"

"You're lying to the world!"

The small man's lower lip trembled. "You don't think I'm a good actor? I'm the quickest study in town!"

"I'm saying you don't have a prayer, the way it's going."

"If you're good, it's got to come. I'm good! The only problem is I'm a little guy! How many parts

do they write for us little guys?"

"They write them if they want to."

Mills' eyes had misted, as his recovery dissolved. He got out a handkerchief which looked immense in his small hands. He blew his nose. "That doesn't make sense."

"The hell it doesn't. When I was up there, I was selling to and getting drunk with some of the highest-paid movie and TV personnel in this community. I know what I'm talking about. You've got to have a front. No front, no dice. You think that hotel's a front? Everybody who ever came zinging off that freeway has looked at it. What happens? They phone for Jerry Mills. The desk clerk says what hotel it is. They hang up. You live in that place, you can't be any good. That's how they think!"

"What do I do? What do you do? Suicide?"

Farnswell screwed the end of his cigarette against an ash tray, face rigid. "It takes money! Then you move out of the crumb-bum hotel. Check into the Beverly Hills. Start driving a good car. Wear the cloth. Get those teeth replaced. Your phone starts ringing."

"They're suddenly writing parts for little guys?"

"If you've got the front, you've got the juice again. So get that

front any way you can. *Any* way! Because then you can say, 'I want another series, this time with some real meat in it for me.' And it gets done, because you've got the front they believe in! If you look like a winner, you *are* a winner! If you look like a loser—" Farnswell lost his voice. He sat trembling.

Jerry Mills stared at the table, as though ready to cry. Then his actor's instinct overcame, the lines in his face softened, and he managed to grin. "I may be a little guy, but I'm a good guy. I never cut anybody in my life. The good guys always win."

"Nuts!"

Mills laughed and punched Farnswell's arm. "The public's waiting. I got to deliver."

When Farnswell returned to his room, he lay on his bed again, the hot and heavy air blowing in. He crossed a forearm over his eyes, remembering how Jerry Mills had maintained his bright and demonstrative facade all the way back to the hotel. Then when he'd left him in the lobby, the little guy was tucked up on a chair, his face looking as though he'd just been given the death penalty.

He heard the familiar, mechanically spaced footsteps moving along the hall. There was the sound of a key being fitted into the ancient

lock of the door at the end of the hallway. Jones, he thought.

Again he tried to remember where he'd seen the man before. He recalled Jerry Mills saying in his piping voice, "... I can smell a crook every time ..."

Farnswell sat up. The memory gears had finally meshed. His nerve ends came alive. A second name appeared clearly out of his subconscious: Thurston—eleven years ago, when Farnswell had still been living in Council Bluffs!

He left the room and took the elevator down. When he crossed the lobby Jerry Mills called to him, "Where you going?"

He didn't reply. Farnswell walked quickly to the library. He found a Los Angeles *Times* dated July 11, 1955. The story was buried, though it had been the big one, with blown-up photographs, in Iowa and Nebraska; but there was a small picture and a brief summary: Joseph Hobler. Eleven years had passed, but it was the same man—Jones.

He read the story swiftly. Joseph Hobler, an itinerant carpenter, had entered the Omaha mansion of Mr. and Mrs. A. D. Thurston, had stolen cash, jewelry, and furs amounting to over fifty thousand dollars. He had also killed the wealthy couple.

Sweating, Farnswell found what

he wanted at the end of the story: relatives had amassed and offered a reward of \$35,000 for information leading to the arrest of Joseph Hobler.

Farnswell left the library as rain finally began striking the sidewalk, and found a telegraph office. He wrote on a form, "Have information about the location of Joseph Hobler. Is reward still in effect. Reply by return wire to Paul Farnswell, c/o ... ." Perhaps he should phone the Council Bluffs police, but if he did, they might try to extract the information without offering the reward. A return wire would clinch it. Hand shaking, he completed the message.

He was soaked when he returned to the lobby, but he didn't care. As he crossed the floor, Jerry Mills called, "Where'd you go?"

Ignoring Mills, he stepped into the elevator and rode up, walked silently to the end of the corridor where he listened until he heard movement, then returned to his room. Hobler had made an intelligent hotel selection. Old men with dimming memories, two-bit actors who thought of nothing else but the phone ringing—who'd give a damn here about Joseph Hobler?

Farnswell lay on the bed again, feeling a surging exuberance. His luck had turned. If it came off, he was back on his feet. He'd made a



mistake, putting it all on Cholly Amberson's promises the first time. This time he would do it himself.

He waited an hour. Then he lifted the telephone and said to the night clerk, "I'm expecting a telegram. Let me know when it comes in."

He lay still, listening for the mechanical steps to sound in the corridor. *What*, he thought suddenly, *if he decided to leave!*

He listened tensely. Another hour went by. He picked up the telephone. "Isn't that wire in?"

"If it was, I'd've let you know," the clerk said defensively.

Farnswell hung up angrily. He got up to pace, stopping every few minutes to listen for those steps. His clothes hung on him damply. The rain had stopped outside, and he was sweating with the heavy air. He'd better make sure, he decided. He hurried to the elevator.

Twenty minutes later Jerry Mills bounced down the stairway, passed the public telephone and rounded the corner to face the desk. "Elevator still stuck?" the clerk asked.

"Yeah."

"What did the maintenance dum-dum say?"

"Said it might take two, three hours to move her this time."

"How's Farnswell?"

"Mad as hell."

The clerk held up a yellow envelope. "I got a wire for him."

"Give it to me," Mills said, his eyes brightening with curiosity.

"It's for Farnswell."

"If it's important, I'll run up to the fourth floor and shout it down to him."

The clerk handed him the envelope, shrugging.

Mills moved away and opened the envelope quickly. He read: "Reward of thirty-five thousand dollars for information leading to arrest of Joseph Hobler still in effect. Contact Los Angeles police immediately."

He remembered the early dinner with Farnswell, who had been a long way from thirty-five thousand then. All he'd been doing was fretting, trying to remember who that bum Jones . . .

Mills took a deep breath, drawing his four-foot body up straight.

"Important?" the night clerk called.

"No." Jerry Mills walked to the telephone with a confident strut, sliding the telegram into his pocket. Taking a cigar from his shirt pocket, he put it between his teeth, then placed a dime in the coin slot. He dialed zero, said, "Let's have the police." He bit the cigar aggressively, feeling the quivering excitement of knowing that he was making a certain comeback.

*Procrastination has been known to provide "Rope Enough" for the hangman.*



So you were miles away from the Biltmore Hotel tonight, or rather last night, at eleven o'clock," Lieutenant Blanchard said thoughtfully.

"At's right," Tommy Horne told him. "Miles and miles. Practically on the opposite side of the city from there."

Blanchard punched out a cigarette in the ashtray atop his paper-littered desk. He glanced at the third man in the office, Detective Dominic Corsi.

"He has got an alibi, of sorts," Corsi murmured.

Horne swiveled to give Corsi a once-over. "Whatta you mean, 'of sorts'? You and that other cop checked it out, didn't you? And Shirley told you I was with her all evening?"

Corsi made no reply. He fiddled with a notepad and pencil he was

holding on the arm of his big chair.

"You expect us to take the word of a broad like Shirley Yumas?"

Lt. Blanchard barked. "She'd lie her head off for a dime, and give you a nickle change."

Tommy Horne shrugged heavily padded shoulders. "Says you." His voice grew heated, "Send your stooges out to my place at one o'clock in the morning, drag me outta bed for no reason they'll give me—"

"We gave you the reason," Dom Corsi put in, "though you were so anxious to tell us about your alibi, you hardly gave me and my partner time to open our mouths."

Lt. Blanchard said, quietly, "By the way, Dom, speaking of your partner, why don't you see if Peterson is back yet from the—other matter he was going to check out."

Corsi rose with a nod of his sleek dark head. He left the lieutenant's office for the big robbery-homicide squad room outside and pulled the door shut after him.

"Now," Blanchard said, returning his attention to Tommy Horne, "let's go over it again. Right around eleven o'clock, about three hours ago, a couple of boys wearing masks and .45's held up the night clerk at the hotel, wanted him to open the safe where guests had left valuables—"

"Yeah, yeah," Horne said with a yawn that didn't quite match his intent gray eyes. "So you told me, already."

"Then the hotel detective came into the lobby," Blanchard went on, ignoring the interruption. "There was a fast exchange of gunfire. The two hoods took off out the door—but one of them didn't make it to the car waiting at the curb. The hotel dick put a slug through his fat head, and he dropped on the sidewalk. His buddy got in the car and sped away. Turns out the dead punk is Frenchy Raymond, an old, old friend and former cellmate of yours, Tommy. You wonder I had you hauled in?"

Horne shoved a hand through the thick mass of his reddish hair. "You've got nothing at all to tie me to that hotel rumble. I was at Shirley's pad from seven till past midnight. Ask her, why don't you."

Blanchard leaned back in his chair and eyed the dingy ceiling of his office. The truth was that he didn't have anything, except a moral certainty, concerning Horne's part in the robbery—but he did have something else up his sleeve.

Dom Corsi came back into the office. He seemed a little excited. "Yeah, Peterson's back," he told the lieutenant. "It's official."

"Ah," Blanchard sighed with satisfaction. "What did it?"

"A knife. Six times in the back and chest." Corsi sat down and picked up his notepad and pencil.

Horne looked from one man to the other. "What's all this jazz? You cops framing some other poor guy?"

"I'm giving you a last chance to cop out," Blanchard told him. "You were with Frenchy—"

"Nuts," Horne said, "I'm leaving," and he started to get up.

"Sit back down there," Blanchard snapped. "Dom, if he makes another move, belt him one."

Horne hurriedly resumed his seat. "Cops," he muttered.

"I just want to be absolutely sure I understand you," Blanchard said. "You claim you were with this dame, Shirley Yumas, between the hours of seven and midnight—"

"After midnight. I'd just got home and into the sack, when this guy here and another one started pounding on my door along towards one o'clock," Horne said heatedly.

"Okay. You'll swear to that?" asked the lieutenant.

"Whatta I been telling you, the last half-hour?"

As he spoke, Horne was watching Dom Corsi, who was busily scribbling notes on his notepad. Horne frowned. He crossed and

re-crossed his legs, obviously restless.

Blanchard directed a glance at Corsi. "Dom, you and Peterson got to the apartment where Tommy lives at one. What exactly happened?"

"He was in bed," Corsi said. "Gave us the story about the Yumas woman. We waited while he dressed, then started downtown with him. He kept yakking about his alibi, so we stopped at an all-night drugstore, and Peterson went inside and called the Yumas woman's place—"

"And she told you I was telling it straight," Horne snapped. "But you still had to drag me down here."

"Actually, Peterson didn't speak with Shirley Yumas," said Corsi smoothly. "He talked to the landlady there."

Horne gaped. "I don't get it. What—"

"Peterson couldn't reach Shirley Yumas, so he called the landlady, asked her to go check," Corsi said. Then he took his time lighting a cigarette.

"Yeah, yeah," Horne rasped. "Shirley's a heavy sleeper. But you did get to her, didn't you?"

Corsi didn't answer. He looked at Blanchard.

"Oh, yes," the lieutenant said. "Officers—reached her. Uh huh.

The only thing that really puzzles us, Tommy, is why you not only admit you were at her place—you insist on it."

"What's that mean?" Horne asked. He squirmed around on his chair, ran a finger around the collar of his wilted shirt. "Course I was with her. She'll tell you."

Corsi finished writing a note. He said reflectively, "I'll tell you, Lieutenant. Probably someone saw Horne at the woman's place—and Horne knows it, so he's trying to pull a swiftie on us. By insisting he was there, he makes it look like he couldn't have—you know. He probably doesn't realize just how close the medical examiner can get, nowadays, to the exact time a person has died . . ."

Paying no attention to Horne, the lieutenant said, "Yes, that makes sense, Dom. He thinks he can bluff us into believing—"

"Wait a minute!" Horne exploded. He surged to his feet. Sweat was pouring down his narrow face. "Whatta you guys talking about here?"

"Sit down," Blanchard said. "I've got news for you, boy. You were just one of a dozen punks we talked to, about the hotel job. But you had an alibi, and it turned out to be Shirley Yumas. Detective Peterson checked it out."

Horne sat down slowly. He

looked bewildered. He mopped his face on the sleeve of his flashy sport jacket. "So? I don't understand what—"

"You poor dumb slob," Corsi said. "Where do you think Peterson's been the last half-hour?"

It took Horne a moment to get it. Then he almost fainted.

"You mean—you mean this rumble about somebody getting knifed?" he croaked. "Was that—Shirley?"

Silence. Blanchard and Dom Corsi watched him squirm.

"Now, wait. Wait a minute," Horne started.

"I've been waiting, a long time," Blanchard broke in, "to nail you with a rap that'll put you away—permanently. Now I've got it. We've been feeding you rope ever since you walked in here, and now you've hung yourself."

Horne began to curse. Then he blurted, "That stupid broad. Everybody knew sooner or later some guy she's horsed around with would knock her off. And of course it had to happen this one night out of all nights."

"Tough," Blanchard said. "Why'd you—"

"Ah, I wasn't near her place last night," Horne said. "Honest. I set it up with her on the phone, see. Yeah, yeah. It was me and poor old Frenchy pulled the hotel heist.

A fat lot of good it done us. That hotel fuzz busted in before we could make the score."

Blanchard gave a loud snort. "So now you claim you were one of the bandits? Come on, boy. Sure, a fall for attempted robbery beats a murder rap, but I don't think we'll play it that way. Not when you've sworn you were at Shirley Yumas' apartment until midnight—"

"I tell you, I ain't seen her in weeks. I just talked to her on the phone. Told her how much it was worth for the alibi—don't you guys understand?"

Corsi slapped his notepad against his knee. "That isn't the way it reads here."

"Listen," Horne gulped, "I'll show you where I ditched the gun I used. That ought to prove I was there at the hotel. Slugs from my gun are splattered around the lobby there. You can match them up. I ain't taking no murder rap."

"Your proof had better be good, boy, if you want to squirm out of the Yumas deal," Blanchard said meaningfully. "Or else you're stuck with it."

Horne got up. "Listen, I'll take you right now, to where I hid the gun. Come on; gimme a break, for once."

Still the lieutenant hesitated. Finally, reluctantly, he nodded his head. "Dom, you and Peterson take this bum where he wants to go. But if he tries to pull anything—like suddenly forgetting where the gun is—you know what to do."

Moments later, when Corsi and the sweating Horne had left the office, Blanchard suddenly burst into laughter. It wasn't often that a killer helped send himself to the chair. Of course, Horne didn't know—yet—that the hotel detective had died of wounds received in the gun battle.

He'd find out, soon enough.

Humming to himself, Blanchard got up, stalked to the corridor door and jerked it open. A uniformed cop was on post outside.

"Alright," the lieutenant snapped. "Go bring that Yumas dame along from the detention cell. I want to have a chat with her. If there's anything I can't stand, it's a no-talent liar."



*A fly can lose but one life, a simple fact known even to the spider.*



IN THE luxurious hotel room overlooking the Bay of Naples glistening in the setting sun, two middle-aged ladies chatted pleasantly. Surface talk, their conversation gave no hint of their reflections.

The hostess, thin and dark in prim black, with the youthful face of one who nibbles at life rather than devours it, appeared innocent and passionless compared to

the other. Yet it was Marcia who regarded her guest as a spider might an unwary fly. Vivienne, in girlish pink which accented her

plumpness, and with gray-black roots marring her yellow hair and the sensuous face of one who constantly participates in life and is soiled by it, seemed relaxed.

"What a coincidence that we met in the square," Vivienne murmured, as a small maid, olive-skinned and peasant-skirted, cleared the remnants of the *piccata* from the candlelit table and brought in a bowl of apples and almonds.

"It's never a coincidence when Americans meet in Italy," Marcia answered. "We all cluster around the same squares and fountains. Too, I'd heard from home that you were touring near here. Your sister told Mother." She didn't add that she'd had her parents keep her posted on Vivienne's whereabouts, which they'd thought good sportsmanship; nor that during the past week she had been actively searching for Vivienne.

"Touring is a word used by the successful," Vivienne said wistfully. "Wandering is what I do."

The slight sympathy evoked in Marcia by the words evaporated at the sight of Vivienne's still round bosom and shapely legs. Possibly Vivienne had had it rough, financially, since Tom's death, while she herself had made money. Still, there were other ways of being successful than the most obvious,

and a restless spirit, not a roaming body, made a wanderer.

"You tour," the guest went on, "with your music."

Marcia glanced at the talisman of every hotel room she occupied, her rented grand piano with the embroidered covering protecting its gloss, like a shawl a delicate person. Thanks to Vivienne, the piano had been a person to her through the years, the only constant companion, friend and mate she'd had. "I was lucky to click with it."

"I read about your last concert. The critic said you interpreted Chopin as well as Rosalind Turek does Bach. I don't know who Rosalind Turek is, but that's a compliment, isn't it?"

That compliment, like others about her singing tones and the nuances of her shadings, as always, whirled through Marcia's head meaninglessly. She suspected that musical talent, like other such gifts, was more admired by those who heard it from box seats than by those who, happening to possess it, had to use it as a life-substitute. "Let's not talk about music. Let's talk about us."

"That's the subject I've been hoping to avoid," Vivienne said, embarrassedly.

Marcia's expression hardened. "At this point, the—circumstances



—are just something you and I shared.”

Vivienne looked at her curiously. “I should have known a woman as—great—as you are, from the music, would feel that way. But when you stopped me tonight, my first thought was that you felt toward me the way most women in your place would and I—got scared.”

“Scared?” Marcia forced a laugh. “Of me?”

“I harmed you long ago. Another in your place might think—of harming me now.”

“Let’s not use ambiguous words like ‘harm.’ You were a divorcee living next door to us, and my trusted friend. Somehow, possibly helped by such stimuli as the moonlight on the nearby Wabash, you managed to run off with my husband—”

“It didn’t happen the way you put it,” Vivienne said.

“How did it happen? I’ve always been curious.”

“I can’t explain it,” Vivienne said, “especially to someone as—self-controlled—as you’ve always been. But Tom and I had to do what we did.”

“If Tom was driven by a wild passion for you,” Marcia said, “he successfully hid it from me.”

“But from no one else,” Vivienne said, artlessly. “I guess because

you’re the artistic type, with your thoughts always above the flesh, we did surprise *you*.”

This artistic type, Marcia reflected, was now going to claim her revenge—a life for a life. Vivienne had taken hers and left the hulk to exhaust itself pushing an ordinary talent to an undreamed-of potential. For with Tom gone and no appetite for other men, what could she have done with her years but follow the instructions of piano coaches, practice eight hours a day, and finally smile woodenly over concert-stage footlights at the audiences of the world? She had planned this action for seventeen years. Now, the victim had been relatively easily found, had come with her readily and was unconsciously goading her to it. “Now that you realize my thoughts *are* always above the flesh,” she said, disarmingly, “you trust me, don’t you?”

“I came with you, didn’t I?”

“Why? To find out how I’ve managed without Tom?”

“No,” Vivienne said, in a low voice. “Because you talk with the accent of home, and I was sure you’d give me good food. I haven’t heard the one or had the other in some time. But now that I’ve heard your talk and had your good food, I hope Tom and I didn’t hurt you too much.”

"You didn't hurt me at all. Witness the piano. How many women pianists make it big? Dame Myra Hess, Turk, Novaes—only a few. With Tom I'd have been an ordinary housewife; without him I've touched the stars."

"I guess you have," Vivienne said.

Marcia shivered. Failures always had their dreams of success as an opiate against loneliness, but no one was lonelier than the successful, alone. What was hollower for a performer than a concert stage before an audience with no one in it cared for or caring? If she'd been a failure, she might have forgiven Vivienne, but success made the revenge more necessary. "The past is past," she said, smiling. "Now, we're Americans far from home and you're visiting me. I've a treat for you." She rang for the maid.

The maid came in with a pitcher.

"Lemonade," Vivienne said delightedly. "Made the American way. Lemony, with lots of ice."

"Made the Indiana way. I remember you loved lemons. You used to suck lemon halves with sugar."

"Imagine your remembering! The veal was flavored with lemon, too. How considerate you are, and what a fool I was to worry."

"You were foolish indeed," Mar-

cia agreed as she turned away from her guest and took a tall glass from the cupboard, a certain glass containing a few powdered grains which, when mixed with lemonade, Marcia knew, would kill.

It takes six weeks for the poison to close the kidneys of its victim and cause death from uremia, the book on poisons in the Rome library had said. By then she'd be safe behind the Iron Curtain on a Budapest stage, this encounter with Vivienne forgotten by its only other witness, the small maid.

Turning back to Vivienne, Marcia asked conversationally, "How long have you been in Europe?"

"Ten years. But we traveled around in the States before that."

Traveling with Tom . . . Marcia thought of sidewalk cafes in Paris she'd sat in, alone, of the car ride through the grandeur of the Amalfi mountains taken with a fellow passenger, a German woman who couldn't speak English but had smiled with irritating recognition that they were both those pitiable objects; women alone; she thought of Bavarian Alps, seen alone, of the Mediterranean at night, seen alone. Only once had *she* traveled with Tom.

"Tom and I," she couldn't help saying, "went to San Francisco on our honeymoon. We rode cablecars and ate at wharf fish-places. There



was a baby-grand in our hotel lobby, which overlooked the Golden Gate. I'd play Debussy and he'd recite Francois Villon's poems to me, in French, to the music."

Vivienne smiled. "Those poems are effective even without Debussy."

"I should have realized," Marcia said bitterly, "that you'd be famil-

iar with them too. Stupid of me."

"I had them fifteen years to your two," Vivienne said. "They sounded impressive in the States but ridiculous in Paris, with his American accent. But who could stop him from spouting the only French he knew?"

Marcia realized with a slight shock that she hadn't known Tom had had a poor French accent. That wasn't something one noticed when one was young and in love. What did a poor accent matter? She filled Vivienne's glass with lemonade. "Didn't Tom get a good job with an engineering firm in Kansas City right after—he left with you?"

"That's right. A good job."

Until Vivienne's sister had babbled that news to her one bright, hot morning as she'd dusted Tom's big chair, she'd convinced herself that it was a fling and that he'd be back. But the words 'good job' made it permanent and had sealed her doom as this concoction would Vivienne's. "All the while he was a teller at that bank in South Bend, he talked about finding some opening in engineering. He was lucky to find one so quickly after he went with you."

"We'd driven off in the car, *your* car," Vivienne said, somewhat sheepishly. "It was summer, you remember. When we got to K.C.,

Tom bought a newspaper and saw an ad for an engineering trainee. He answered it in his shirtsleeves, with the sweat from the road on his face. Maybe if he'd cleaned up he'd have looked like the other applicants and he mightn't have got the job but as it was, the boss probably figured he was so—dedicated that he put wanting-the-job even before cleanliness."

Marcia, too, had traveled that summer. Numbed beyond tears, she'd passed flat Indiana towns on the small electric train and then had made her way through Chicago to Professor Hoelick's studio overlooking Lake Michigan. Unawed by the giant grands back-to-back, or by the electric metronome sternly overhead—so different from Miss Claver's prim parlor-with-up-right—she'd played a Beethoven Sonata and then said, "I've studied the piano casually, under a local teacher, most of my life. I'd like to do something important with my music now. I've heard your name. Will you teach me?"

"The maximum talent, application, and luck," the bushy-haired German answered, "is still no guarantee that the possessor of them all will accomplish anything artistically. In your case, your timing is execrable and, obviously, you've never been taught that a sustaining pedal exists. Still, you

have the beginning of a singing tone. If you can meet my price . . ."

Unhelped by Tom, she'd met it through her steno and typing.

"Tom clashed with his boss after three months in K.C.," Vivienne was saying, "and that ended the engineering. Then he tried sales promotion."

"I can't believe he gave up engineering that easily," Marcia said. "He kept talking about a series of tunnels he wanted to build some day."

Vivienne smiled. "If I didn't know which two years you had him, I could figure out the dates from that brainstorm."

"What do you mean?" Marcia asked uneasily.

"His notions lasted about two years apiece and produced their own job-kicks. I went through at least seven. I didn't mind the insurance salesman bit or the TV producer bit, in the States, but in Europe his ideas got wilder. The worst was the hotel in Yugoslavia in which he wanted to invest, without knowing the language."

Marcia glanced sharply at her guest, jolted by the words. After Tom had left her, she had continued to have images of him: Tom, a thin, dignified thirtyish, a gray-templed, distinguished fortyish, ever onward and upward in engineering and, recently, even won-

derful in death. It was jarring to realize that Vivienne had so unsettled him. "I'm surprised he was so—unstable."

"He wasn't exactly unstable. Just restless in jobs. The two-and-a-half-year stint with that bank, when he was engaged to and then married to you, was the longest he ever had in one place, he told me."

She was lying, Marcia decided. Tom had been as solid as stone in the old days, his head filled with dreams of one career, engineering. Still, a remark of her father's popped into her head. "He's as solid as a five-letter word beginning with 'S', all right. Sieve, not stone. Your love's blinding you, daughter." Her father had been jealous of Tom. Weren't all fathers of their sons-in-law?

"I suspect he'd have exploded in some other way," Vivienne went on, "if he hadn't met me."

"I never saw signs that an explosion was coming."

"They just weren't visible to you. For example, you never got that fifty dollars back, did you?"

"What fifty dollars?"

"The money that was stolen from your purse the day of the picnic."

"Oh, that money. No. But our cleaning girl took it. She admitted it, and said she'd spent it."

"She was protecting Tom," Vivi-

enne said. "She'd had an affair with him."

"I don't believe you!" Marcia burst out. "You can say anything here, after all this time and with Tom dead. You know the only way you can boost yourself in my eyes is by making him seem bad. Next you'll tell me that rotten Tom corrupted innocent you."

"No," Vivienne said, softly. "We deserved each other."

Marcia couldn't deafen herself to the ring of truth in the tone.

Shaken, she gathered memories once precious and suddenly seeming soiled, and searched for consolation in them. "The—fifty dollars. How did you know about that? No one but Tom and the maid— But of course. Tom probably told you about it later."

"No," Vivienne said. "At the time. *He* took it and spent it on me. We had a lovely drunk on it at the Three Bay Bar. You were awake when Tom got home, he said. He told you some tale about a lonely bank examiner promising him a promotion if he drank with him until three a.m.—"

In Tom's arms, Marcia remembered, painfully, despite the reek of his breath, she'd consoled him after the dead hours spent with the bank examiner. There'd been other nights when he'd said he'd been delayed with other bank examin-

ers, or scouts for engineering firms. And times when he'd driven the cleaning girl home and had got lost on the way back, he'd said. He'd been such a silly, Marcia had murmured fondly, getting lost for an hour on a straight road. Other money had disappeared, and the pearl ring, an heirloom of her mother's. Once the memories started souring, Marcia, still holding Vivienne's glass, was powerless to stop them.

"You must have had quite a life with him," Marcia said, "because presumably when *you* lived with him, you knew him."

"It wasn't bad," Vivienne said, seriously. "We had our ups and downs, like most couples."

One's lot, Marcia reflected, was indeed tailored to suit one.

"When he didn't work," Vivienne said, "I did. I had some weird jobs, from hash slinging to hat checking."

"He let *you* work! He wouldn't even let me give piano lessons!"

"So he told me. But that was because he couldn't stand kids around. Which was why we never had any, and probably why you didn't have any."

The golden wraith of the child who might have been and whose coming, Marcia'd thought, had been only temporarily postponed by Tom, left its perch on her con-

science and vanished into oblivion.

Vivienne was still talking of her jobs. "The one job I had that I never let him forget was the time *he* arranged for me to—well— It was very dignified. Tom had met a rich New Yorker in a London pub. We were broke, and the fellow wanted a date for the night. Tom told him he knew an English girl—I was so good with the limey accent that the guy never noticed my midwest twang. But later, whenever Tom and I fought, I'd say, 'You've done the worst a man can do, by your woman.'"

For the first time, Vivienne's eyes clouded with pain. As insensitive as Vivienne seemed, Tom had hurt her, too.

"People are like icebergs," Marcia breathed, her hand tightening on the glass. "Nine-tenths submerged beneath the surface. I never knew Tom at all."

Vivienne shrugged. "He wasn't a bad guy. And shaved, dressed-up and sober, he had enough charm to win a queen, right to the end. With that baby face and tousled hair, he *was* handsome when he was young, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Marcia said, "he was." And she let her earliest and most sacred memories of him sour with the rest.

"He grew enormously fat before he died. In my opinion, his weight

brought on the heart attack, not the brawl he was in. But maybe you never heard how he died."

"No, I never did."

"He died in my arms," Vivienne said.

"Oh?" Marcia didn't resent it in the least.

"In Paris, some months ago. Tom had been drinking, and this fellow came up to him and said—It's a long story. Are you sure you're interested?"

"On second thought," Marcia said, "I'd rather hear it some other time. I've absorbed enough about Tom for one night."

"I guess a woman as—great—as you are, with the music, can't waste her time on small talk about a man she knew for only a little while. My throat's dry from all this talk. I suppose that gorgeous glass is for me. May I have it?"

"Glass?"

"The lemonade."

"Oh, *this* glass," Marcia said, staring at it. "There seems to be a spot on it. I'll get you a clean one."

"Don't bother."

"I insist." And Marcia poured the contents of the glass down the wash-basin drain.

Vivienne had three glassfuls of lemonade. Then she rose and said, "Guess I'll tootle off to my digs, as crummy as they are."

"Don't go!" Marcia cried, im-

pulsively. The leaden feeling inside her for seventeen years had melted. She was appalled at what she'd almost done to this woman, this—human being, this fellow-sufferer at the hands of Tom. How could she make it up? "I have twin beds. Stay here while I'm here. My next concert isn't until next week, in Vienna."

"I couldn't bear to," Vivienne said. "It'd be too painful to leave it all when I had to. I'm not doing badly now. A friend I had left me a few lira to get by on."

Marcia studied Vivienne momentarily, then offered, "I can spare some lira too."

Vivienne protested, but not strongly, and then left richer than when she'd come.

Marcia stood at the window and watched the other leave the plushy hotel entrance and then walk tiredly past dusty street urchins and animals toward wherever cave-dwellers live.

"There but for the grace of God," she murmured, and quietly began to weep. Then, carefully, she took the covering off the piano, sat down and began to play Chopin nocturnes, all nineteen, followed by the lesser known twentieth, posthumous, in C-sharp minor, and never had her trill been so exquisite nor her crescendos and descrescendos so gradual.

*One who ventures afield for green pastures may find himself encompassed by hay.*



"I'M LOOKING for the push button," James Hartley said.

I smiled. "Really?"

He stared glumly at his reflection in the bar mirror. "Someplace

in this stinking world there's a push button and when it's pressed, the whole damn planet blows up." He looked my way. "Someday I'm going to find that push button,



and when I do, I'm going to press it."

I sighed. "Obviously you are unhappy, but why insist upon taking the rest of the world with you?"

Hartley, a well-dressed man in his thirties, shrugged. "I'd be doing everybody a favor. Existence hurts too much."

I watched him finish his second martini, then said, "Would you care for another one, Mr. Hartley?"

He automatically glanced at his watch before he nodded. "I guess I got time for one more." He frowned. "How did you know my name? We never met before, did we?"

"Not on this plan . . ." I caught the bartender's eye and signaled for two more drinks.

Hartley's eyes went to the small box on the bar in front of me. "What's that?"

"A box," I said.

He shrugged. "All right. So it's none of my business."

I waited until the bartender had brought our drinks and retired. "Rather a coincidence that I should run into you while I was looking for Alberti," I said.

Hartley sipped from his glass. "So who's Alberti?"

I tapped the box. "I have to give this to him. He may keep it an entire year, but I do hope that this

time it will be put to good . . ."

Hartley eyed the box again. "What you got in there? Jewels or something?"

"No." I very carefully raised the cover.

Hartley glanced in, frowned, then looked at me. "What's that?"

"A push button," I said.

He stared at it again and then at me. He turned resolutely back to his drink. Hartley said nothing for a long while. Finally he exhaled loudly. "Now don't tell me that your little push button will actually . . ."

"Of course," I said. "However, it isn't your turn. Mr. Alberti has a priority."

He shook his head. "How could something that *small* . . ."

"Size has absolutely nothing to do with it," I said. "The box could be as large as a pyramid or as small as a pea. It is the Will of Intent it contains that counts."

He glared at the pushbutton. "So if I press that damn thing, the world will actually . . ."

"Yes."

He snorted. "Like hell." His hand moved toward the box, one finger extended."

"Now, really, Mr. Hartley, I don't think you're being at all fair to Mr. Alberti." I rubbed my jaw. "Well, if you really *insist*, I suppose I *could* let you press it."

Hartley's hand stopped and he glanced at me sharply. He withdrew the finger. "I'm not worried about anything cataclysmic happening, but maybe you got a little nitroglycerin or something like that in there?"

I smiled. "You think that I might be contemplating self-destruction and I simply do not have the courage to press the button myself? And I am trying to persuade you into doing the job for me?" I shook my head. "No, that is not the case at all." I reached into the box and lifted the push button.

Hartley regarded it warily. "It *looks* just like an ordinary push button."

"So it does," I said, "and mounted in a piece of wood." I shoved it closer to him. "Why not press it?"

He licked his lips. "Why should I?"

I sighed. "Ah, well, so be it. But I have great hopes for Mr. Alberti. He's the sixteenth, you know."

"The sixteenth?"

I nodded. "You see, Mr. Hartley, your sincere desire to blow the world to bits is not entirely unique. As a matter of fact, the wish has been expressed so often that the . . . ah . . . Chief decided that we might just as well capitalize upon it. So we prepared this little push

button and we have, so far, presented it to fifteen people, allowing each one of them a year in which to destroy the world."

His eyes were on the push button. "And none of them did?"

I chuckled. "Obviously not. All of them had—shall we say—*big* mouths, but when it actually came to *pressing* the button, they chickened out and I was forced to re-claim the package. However, I



have great hopes for Alberti. He is quite a desperate man, on the verge of bankruptcy."

Hartley cleared his throat. "You mean that sometime during the year . . ."

I nodded. "It could happen at any moment, day or night. Just a slight pressure of the finger and . . . pffff!"

He licked his lips. "Suppose someone wanted to buy that thing from you? How much would you ask?"

I shook my head. "Now, Mr. Hartley, mortals may find money useful, but what possible use could I . . ." I turned as a rather stout, gray-haired man passed us and took a seat at the farther end of the bar.

"Excuse me," I said, "I believe that's Alberti."

I re-boxed the push button and moved down beside Alberti. When I departed fifteen minutes later, the box and its contents were in his possession.

I saw the stout, gray-haired man again an hour later in the dining room at the Meridith Hotel.

He looked up as I approached. "Hartley bought the push button

from me for exactly ten thousand."

I sat down at his table. "Well, Pete, I guess it pays to listen to bartenders when they talk about some of their customers. That's how I learned that Hartley always gets onto the subject of that push button after a drink or two."

I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked back.

It was Hartley and another man. They showed their badges.

In the squad car, Detective Sergeant Hartley said, "That's the first time I've been approached personally by con artists." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "But suppose there really *is* a push button, and suppose I *did* find it. Would I really have the nerve to push it?"

I stared at him coldly. If he didn't, I would.

~~~~~  
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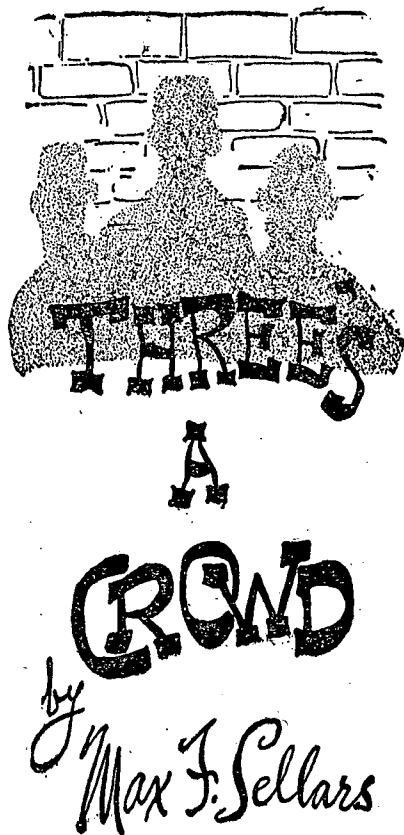
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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*

*It is a fair conclusion that parental training, despite its seeming fulfillment, often makes a regrettable omission.*



**A**FTER a few dying gasps, the battered convertible rolled to a stop beside the dusty gravel road. With disgust, Vince Garrett beat his fist

against the steering wheel and loudly and profanely condemned the fates for stranding him in this alien bucolic setting.

"Of all the dumb broads!" he cried, finally directing his anger, as usual, to his wife. "Why didn't you tell me we needed gas?"

"What good would that have done?" Joan retorted. "You lost all your money in that poker game back there, remember?"

"Aw, those dumb, two-bit hicks!"

A note of sarcasm touched Joan's voice. "They must have been dumb. It took them thirty whole minutes to clean out a big-shot gambler like you."

Glumly, Vince stared out over the green, neatly cultivated fields. "I've never seen such a run of lousy luck."

Earnestly, Joan faced him. "Why don't you let me call Daddy?" Her hand on his arm partially restrained another outburst. "Won't you at least give it a try? Take the job he offered. We can't go on like this."

"What do I know about the

grocery business? Tell me that."

"You're smart, Vince. You could learn."

With a short derisive laugh, he pushed her hand away. "Boy, your old man would get a kick out of that, wouldn't he? For me to come crawling to him on my knees."

"At least there would be a paycheck every week. We could have a real home."

"But don't you see, I couldn't



stand it. He would be looking down his nose at me every minute. It's not natural. A man has to feel independent."

"Can't you feel independent anywhere but at a poker table?" Joan asked acidly.

"Oh you'll see, baby. Just wait—one of these days my luck is bound to change, and when it does you'll be glad I didn't tie myself down to a lousy grocery store."

An ancient black sedan rattled to a stop beside them, engulfing them in a cloud of dust.

"Well, what are you staring at, Hiram?" Vince snapped irritably.

The sedan's driver thrust a massive head out the window. "The name's Lemuel, neighbor," he said amiably, buck teeth flashing in a stupid grin. "You folks out of gas?"

"What business is it of yours?"

Lemuel's grin was indestructible. "My place is just down the road. You can get some there. This old car ain't much, but mebbe I can push you there all right."

"You see, baby," Vince said smugly as they began to move. "I told you our luck was due for a change. Did you get a look at the kisser on that hayseed? A confirmed help-thy-neighbor type if I ever saw one. He'll fill our tank and then get real offended when I try to pay him. It's like a sickness with them."

"I can think of worse diseases," Joan said bitterly.

After about a mile, Lemuel motioned them into the driveway of a ramshackle farmhouse. A girl working in a vegetable garden put down her hoe and curiously approached.

"This here is Avis, my baby sister," Lemuel said. "You wait here. I'll go get the gas."

"He always calls me his baby sister," Avis said, pouting. "But I'll be nineteen years old my next birthday. I'm full growned."

Vince's experienced eye, appraising the bountiful curves of her denim-clad figure, concurred. "Baby, I've seen the prettiest chicks in the country, from Hollywood to New York, and believe me none of them come close to you."

"Aw, mister, you don't mean that."

Vince reached out and patted her hand. "One thing about me, kid, I never say anything I don't mean."

Joan uttered a pained groan.

"Have you really been to those places?" Avis asked, her eyes bright with interest. "Gee, the only big town I've been to is Louisville. I was only six years old then."

Lemuel returned carrying a large can. "I can spare you five gallons," he said. "That'll get you to the next town easy."

"You're a real buddy, Clyde," Vince said, "but I wish you'd let me pay for it."

"The name's Lemuel, neighbor, and don't you worry none. Our paw, rest his soul, fetched us up right. We know more than to help a man do a sin."

"A sin?"

"Charity. Paw always said that it's a bad sin for an able man to

take charity." He grinned again.

"Oh, uh, sure."

"But he told us to be fair to strangers, so's we'll charge you just what it cost us. Uh, five gallons at thirty cents a gallon..." His massive brow furrowed in a supreme mathematical effort. "Uh, sister?"

"A dollar and a half," Avis said proudly.

Vince opened his wallet. "Well look at that!" he exclaimed in mock surprise. "I'm all out of cash. I'll have to write you a check."

Lemuel shook his head. "Paw didn't hold with check writin'. Wouldn't allow it."

Vince held out the wallet for Lemuel's inspection. "You can see for yourself, Jack, the cupboard is bare." He suddenly brightened. "But don't go away—I've got just the thing." He rummaged for a moment in the glove compartment. "I had these loaded in Vegas by the best man in the business." He rattled the dice expertly, and threw them on the hood of the car. "See that? Seven. They'll do it every time. Just think of all the fun you can have—"

With a cry of horror, Lemuel seized the dice as if they were red-hot coals and threw them across the road into a field. His huge, powerful hands locked on Vince's collar, lifting him off the ground. "Sinner! Sinner! Sinner!" he roared, slam-



ming him violently against the car to punctuate his cries.

"Stop that now!" Avis ordered sharply, grabbing Lemuel's arm. "You know Paw wouldn't like it, you gettin' mad like this."

Vince sank weakly to his knees as Lemuel released his grip. "You are right, sister. Anger is the tool of the devil."

"You all right, mister?" Avis asked anxiously. "Brother does get a mite carried away sometimes."

"You know you could kill someone with those hands of yours," Vince gasped, painfully rubbing his neck. "There's no reason to get upset. I've got friends in Indianapolis where I can get some money. I'll mail it to you from there."

Lemuel shook his head. "Paw always said borryin' leads to un-friendliness."

Disgustedly, Vince turned to his wife. "Surely you've got something worth a buck and a half. What happened to that watch your old man gave you for Christmas?"

"Remember that poker game in Cleveland?"

Vince scowled and began searching through her purse. "Ah, here's just the thing," he said, winking at Avis. "All the latest cosmetics: lipstick, rouge, the works. A gal as pretty as you . . ." His voice trailed off at the sight of Lemuel's ominously doubled fist. "Yeah, I know.

Paw wouldn't approve nohow."

"I just thought, Brother," Avis began slowly. "You could use someone to help with the hayin' tomorrow. Why not let him work for some gas?"

"Avis Stern! I will not bring this evil man into Paw's house. How can you think of such a thing? And with Paw only two weeks in his grave. These fancy-dressed city fellers are all the same. You remember those other ones that came here. You know what they done!"

Avis studied Vince's face carefully. "But he doesn't look really bad—just ignorant."

"But Paw—"

"You know what Paw always told us. We're obliged to show sinners the way of salvation. I'll bet a good day's work will chase all of those evil thoughts right out of his head."

"I don't know . . ."

"Besides, he doesn't have to sleep in the house. We can fix him a place in the barn."

Early the following afternoon Vince sat wearily on his cot listening to the sound of rain on the barn roof. With a sigh of disgust, he moved out of range of the cow in the next stall and idly began to shuffle a deck of cards, wincing a little at the pain and stiffness in his fingers.



Joan entered. "Avis and I just finished cleaning the house and doing the dishes," she said. "It probably sounds silly to you, but I can't remember when I've enjoyed myself more. How about you? One morning's work didn't kill you, did it?"

"Don't bug me, woman," he said brusquely.

"Don't you ever get tired of those cards?"

"Don't you ever get tired of nagging?" he mimicked.

Joan sat stiffly on the edge of the cot. "I just called Daddy," she began slowly. "He's telegraphing money for me to come home."

"So beat it then," Vince said sourly. "Run home to Daddy. You have been a drag from the start."

"He said if you want to come, there's a job for you."

Vince snorted. "Doing what? Sweeping floors and stacking jars of pickles on a shelf? Not me, baby. Vince Garrett can do better than that."

"Vince, please."

"Beat it!" He gave her a shove that sent her sprawling to the floor.

Lemuel suddenly appeared at the door. "The mailman's here, ma'am," he said. "If you want to ride to town with him you'd best come. He don't like to wait—" he broke off in confusion. "Did he hit you, ma'am?" he asked, his voice

rising menacingly to a near-roar.

"No, no," Joan said quickly. "That was just Mr. Garrett's inimitable way of saying good-bye."

"Oh," Lemuel said uncomprehendingly.

Without looking at him, Joan said, "Good-bye, Vince," and quickly left the barn.

"A mighty fine woman," Lemuel observed. "You can tell the way she pitched in and helped baby sister with the house chores, she's had good fetchin'-up." He picked up a bale of hay, and in an exercise of sheer delight, lifted it over his head and threw it effortlessly across the barn. "Can't you just feel the goodness spreadin' through you?" he asked, slapping Vince soundly on the back. "Like Paw always said, there ain't nothin' like honest sweat to wash away a man's sins and purify the soul. I'll bet that we've got all them evil thoughts of yours dead on the run!"

"Yeah, sure," Vince said without enthusiasm. "Look, it's stopped raining. Don't you forget our deal. When the hayin's done, I get a full tank of gas and five bucks. Remember?"

Lemuel was piously offended. "I gave my word."

"Well then, let's get with it. We ought to be able to finish by dark."

Lemuel chuckled. "Boy, you city

folks sure are ignorant. Hay spoils if it's put up wet. It'll be tomorrow afternoon before it's dry enough again."

"Tomorrow? You mean I have to hang around here another day? For cryin' out loud, it's not my fault it rained."

Lemuel nodded solemnly and raised his eyes heavenward. "An act of Providence. Mebbe so's to give you more time to think on your wicked past and seek redemption—"

"Aaah . . ." With a groan, Vince lay down on the cot and turned his face to the wall. Presently he dropped into a restless sleep, escaping in his dreams to pleasanter places where the poker games were friendly, and the women friendlier.

He was awakened by a sound on the haymow stairs. A shapely figure was silhouetted for an instant against a window before disappearing into the semi-darkness above.

Vince looked cautiously out the barn door. In an orchard on the other side of the house, Lemuel was engaged in cutting up a dead tree, his powerful arms swinging the axe in a steady cadence that had chips flying in all directions. Vince mounted the stairs.

"Look out," Avis warned. "Don't step on an egg. Dumb old hens just lay 'em anywhere."

"Baby," Vince said, "you were meant for better things than this."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Like what?"

"Like living in a big hotel, wearing fancy clothes, having people to wait on you." He took her hand. "A gal as pretty as you shouldn't have to dirty her hands with work."

She freed her hand and stepped back. "Don't use your city talk on me. Your wife told me all about you."

"I must have been crazy to marry her."

Avis dropped to her knees beside a nest. "She said you were just after her paw's money," she said, carefully putting the eggs in a paper bag, "but he wouldn't give you any unless you worked for it."

Vince sat down beside her in the hay. "She never really tried to understand me—always nagging and complaining." He took her hand again. "But with the right kind of woman, there's no telling how far I could go. Why don't you come with me? You'll never have anything as long as you stay here."

"From the looks of things, you ain't been doin' so good."

"Well, I've had a rotten streak of luck lately, but it's bound to change. You could help it change."

Avis started to rise. "I don't know . . ."

Vince drew her close. "We could be a real item, you and me."

"Don't," Avis said weakly. "You'll break the eggs."

Reluctantly he released her. "Ever been to Florida?"

"No."

"Oh, it's a great place—Miami, with white sandy beaches as far as the eye can see, palm trees, and pretty flowers all over the place. It never gets cold there. A person can really live in a place like that."

Avis leaned back in the hay, a faraway look in her eyes. "Just imagine. It never gets cold!"

"Just two or three days and we could be there," Vince went on softly. "If only we had some money . . ." He paused for a moment. "Maybe you've got a little laying around. It wouldn't take much."

Sadly she shook her head. "No, nothin' but sixty-five cents left over from last week's egg money." She heaved a rapturous sigh. "I sure would like to see Florida."

Vince lapsed into deep thought. "There must be a way. Maybe we could sneak away one of your brother's pigs and sell it."

"I wonder if Paw's money would be enough . . ."

"Or a cow," Vince selected a straw and chewed it meditatively. "Maybe we could sell that stupid cow."

"... but there ain't no use thinkin' about it. We promised Paw we'd never spend it."

The straw fell from Vince's mouth. "Money? Your paw had money? What did he do with it?"

"It's down in the basement."

Vince gave Avis an impetuous hug. "Well, let's go get it, baby, and then it's Florida, here we come!"

"We can't," Avis said. "Paw made us promise to seal it up. Brother worked for a whole day brickin' up a little room in the corner to keep it in."

"But why?"

"Paw always said that easy money is a curse, and the finest bestowal he could leave his kin was the peace that comes from hard work. Paw said there ain't no better way to find salvation in this world."

With difficulty, Vince restrained a comment on Paw's philosophy. In a tone he tried to make casual, he asked, "How much was there?"

"I don't rightly know," said Avis, "but it filled two big shoe boxes plumb full."

"How did your paw get so much money?" Vince asked skeptically.

"When Maw died, rest her soul, there was this insurance paper. Paw didn't hold with insurance, but Maw's daddy got it for her a long

time ago. The company made Paw take the check. Paw cashed it and kept it in two shoe boxes. He said it must have been a temptation sent by Providence to test his soul. But Paw stood firm," Avis said proudly. "He even added to it sometimes when the crops sold for more than we needed. Paw kept the money in his dresser drawer when he was alive, but just before he died, he made us promise to seal it up. Paw was afraid Brother might do something foolish with it." She lowered her voice. "You know, Brother ain't too awfully smart."

"Is that a fact?" Vince asked in mock astonishment. He settled back against the hay for a moment, deep in thought. "Now hear me out, girl," he began slowly. "Don't say anything until you've heard it all. Just because something has been sealed up doesn't mean that it has to stay sealed up."

Shocked, Avis struggled to her feet. "You mean, break our promise to Paw? No! Never!"

"Now, now," Vince said soothingly, "don't be hasty. Your paw was a fine man I'm sure, but he was wrong about money." He took her hand. "Money is good. Money makes people happy. Your grandfather knew that when he took out the policy on your maw. He wanted you to have the money. It

wasn't right for your paw to keep it away from you. Your grandfather worked hard so he could take out that insurance. He'd want for it to make you happy. You want to go places and see things, don't you?"

Avis slowly sat back down in the hay. "I don't know . . ."

Vince took her in his arms. "Just think of that white sandy beach." He pulled her closer. "The moon shining through the palm trees, those long tropical nights just made for love . . ."

"Don't. The eggs."

"Forget the eggs."

Vince laid down the hammer and chisel and wiped his brow on his sleeve. "Oh man," he complained, "this is work. How many more lousy layers of brick do I have to go through?"

Avis peered closely at the hole Vince had made. "Brother wanted to make it good and thick so's all the wickedness couldn't get out, but I think you're just about through."

Vince picked up the hammer and resumed his work. "We'd better hurry," he said. "We want to be out of here before your brother gets back from town."

"It just doesn't seem right, somehow," Avis said. "I was thinking about it all last night. If you were

to get a job in town, and I saved the egg money, I'll bet we could save enough money to get to Florida without doin' this. And we could get married here instead of waitin' till we get there. Let's just brick this hole back up and—"

Vince cut her off abruptly. "Now dōn't get cold feet. There's no percentage in working at some hick job if there's money just laying here. And I told you last night we can't get married for a while. It's against the law. I'm already married. You wouldn't want me to break the law."

He struck the chisel with a savage blow, and almost lost his balance when a hole suddenly opened in the wall. Eagerly he threw aside some loose bricks and peered into the opening.

"Man, it's dark in there! And what a stink!" Vince stuck his arm into the opening. "I can't feel a thing. Baby, if you're puttin' me on . . ."

"You've got to go clear inside to reach it," Avis said. "The money is settin' on top of a table. I'll hand you the lantern when you get inside."

With difficulty, Vince eased his body, feet first, into the hole. "All right, baby—the lantern."

Avis didn't seem to hear him. "I'm sorry, Paw," she said, sobbing a little. "We tried. We tried to

show him the way, just like you told us, but it weren't no use. Some people are just so full of so many different kinds of wickedness that there ain't nothin' can be done."

Vince stuck his head out the hole. "Stop your blubbering and give me the lantern." He reached out and took it from her and pulled it into the hole. "I don't want to stay in this stinking place all day. Now where—"

His scream echoed deafeningly in the tiny room.

The flickering lantern had revealed that Vince was not alone in the cubicle. Two of the three chairs placed around an old-fashioned kitchen table were occupied. One of his macabre companions sat upright, leaning back against the wall, open-mouthed, staring at Vince with unblinking, sightless eyes.

The other had his head cradled in his arms on the table. Vince leaned forward for a closer look, then recoiled in horror as the ghastly sight registered on his stunned brain.

Suddenly the putrid stench was overpowering—even more horrible now that its source was known. Desperately Vince stuck his head back out the opening.

"Why didn't you tell me this is the family tomb?" he gasped, still shaken. "You almost scared me to

death, you and your relatives."

"Oh, them two ain't kin."

"Well then, who . . ."

Avis shook her head sadly. "We tried to show them the way. They came to our house just after we buried Paw, two weeks ago. They were selling tombstones. Paw always said it's a sin for a man to have a monument. We argued and argued, and finally they saw we was right. But then they heard about Paw's money, and no amount of talk could change them on that. They were just bound to get it. Said they would use it to make us more money and we wouldn't have to work no more." Avis shuddered. "Surely they were sent from the devil himself."

Vince's mind cleared somewhat at the mention of money. Gingerly he reached around the corpse on the table and picked up the shoeboxes.

"No you don't, baby," he said, starting to scramble out of the hole. "Nobody's going to seal up Vince Garrett!"

"Brother! Brother! Now!"

Lemuel suddenly appeared from

behind the furnace. Vince froze in horror at the sight of the axe in his hand.

"You'd best go back in," Avis advised calmly. "You saw what happened to that other feller."

Vince obeyed. It seemed to be the sensible thing to do. Lemuel took the lantern from him.

Avis' face appeared at the hole. "I knew you were smarter than that other feller. Now you'll have time to think on your wicked past and find redemption for your sins. And you've got some real bad ones. Paw always said there ain't no worse kind than sins of the flesh."

She frowned. "I hope no more city fellers come. This place is plumb crowded."

Numbly, Vince sat down at the table with his two colleagues, and Lemuel started bricking up the opening, working swiftly but carefully. The opening kept getting smaller, but Vince could only stare in fascination at Lemuel's idiot grin.

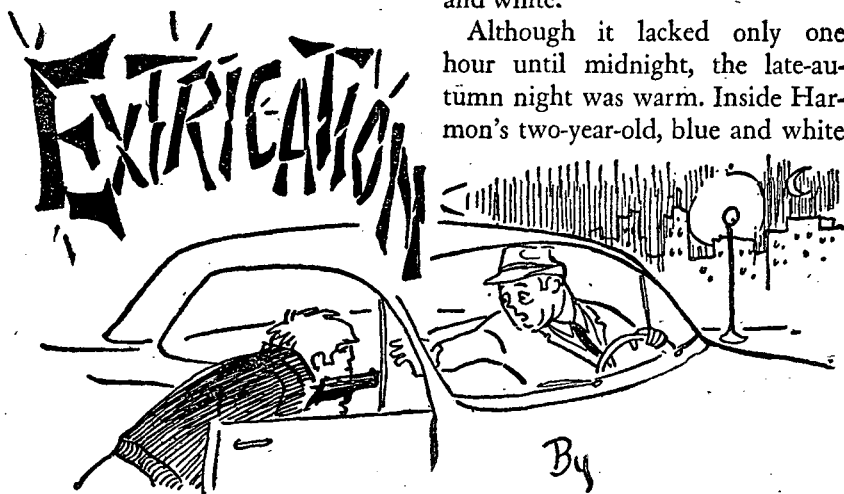
He was still staring when the last brick shut out the light.



*Many creations improve with age, and not the least of these is man, although he may find it imperative to justify certain extravagances.*

with his leather keycase, were soft and white.

Although it lacked only one hour until midnight, the late-autumn night was warm. Inside Harmon's two-year-old, blue and white



ONCE, when he was in his early twenties, Frank Harmon had been lean and sinewy—170 pounds of bone and muscle distributed along a six-foot-one frame. Now he was crowding forty, and the intervening fifteen years of chair-bound inactivity, social cocktail hours and hearty, homecooked meals had taken their toll. Tonight, as he made his way across the dimly-lighted, nearly vacant parking lot, a spare-tire roll of excess flesh lapped over his belt. His hands, as he fumbled

By  
LAWRENCE  
E.  
ORIN

sedan the air was stuffy-hot. He rolled down the glass at his elbow, then stretched across the seat to open the opposite window. That's when he first saw the pistol, and a fraction of a second later the hard, cruel face of the man who held it. Before he could recover from the

surprise, the gunman was in the car beside him, the pistol firmly planted against his ribs.

The intruder's voice was as cold as the steely glint of the weapon he carried. "All right, buster," he said, "don't yell and don't make any sudden moves. Just drive out of the lot nice and easy, and head out of town. You try somethin' foolish, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

Harmon felt a tingle, cold and prickly, creep along his spine. It was a sensation of naked fear, an almost forgotten response to danger. The last time he could remember tasting it was in Korea, pinned down in a shallow hole he'd scraped in the hard, rock-infested earth, while mortar shells dropped like messengers of death around him. Then as now, his mouth was hot and dry.

With a bravado he didn't feel, he tried to keep the tremor from his voice. "You're not going to get away with this. You know that, don't you?"

"Why not? I got nothin' to lose, but you do. I've already knocked off a cop tonight, and I won't burn any hotter if I kill you too. Just remember that." He jabbed with the pistol. "Now get this crate rollin', and no smart stuff or I'll blow a new hole in your head."

His hands sweating, Harmon turned the ignition key. At the

second try the engine came to life, sputtering and complaining. He shoved the gear shift lever to DRIVE, and they rolled out toward the almost-deserted street.

"Which way?" he asked.

The intruder had ducked down, squeezing his slight frame into the cramped space in front of the front seat beneath the dash. His gun still pointed directly at Harmon's middle. "Turn right," he said, "and keep goin'. Don't run any red lights or try anything else foolish. You better hope some cop don't stop us, or you'll be the first, then him."

Harmon drove steadily, slowing down in mid-block, when necessary, to catch the traffic lights as they turned green at the next intersection. Twice cruising police cars pulled alongside, but after their occupants had given the big man driving the car a cursory inspection, they sped away, their revolving red lights flashing in the night.

In the fleeting moments of illumination from passing street lamps, Harmon could make out the features of his unwanted passenger. He was fair-haired, thin-faced and, in spite of a grim expression, probably only twenty or twenty-one years of age. But it was a man-sized weapon the killer held unwaveringly in his hand.



Harmon recognized it as a caliber .45 automatic. Big, heavy and deadly, it was the same kind of pistol he'd carried in the Army.

They were out of the downtown district now, and the only traffic signals they encountered were at occasional cross thoroughfares. The young gunman struggled out of his uncomfortable position, taking his seat close to the right-hand door. Evidently he felt safe enough to chance being seen here in the suburbs.

Harmon kept the car at a reasonable speed. Desperately, he tried to think of a way out of his predicament. Was the man at his side as tough as he seemed? He had to find out.

"How'd you happen to shoot a policeman?" he asked.

"He got in my way, that's all. I was pullin' a job at a liquor store I'd been casin' for a week, when this dumb cop butted in so I had to let him have it. Before I got more than a couple of blocks, the streets were full of fuzz, so I ducked in that parkin' lot. You happened to be the first guy to pull out, so now you got me for company, whether you like it or not."

Harmon was convinced this was substantially what had happened. Shortly before leaving his tenth-floor office he'd heard the

wailing of an unusual number of sirens in the streets below. More headaches for the police, he'd thought at the time, but none of his concern. How wrong he'd been!

"I suppose this is old stuff for you, killing a cop?" he remarked.

"I've made my share of widows for the police welfare fund to donate to," the young man boasted. "By the way, buster, are you married?"

"Yes, I have a wife and two children."

"I didn't ask how many kids you got. What you doin', buster, beggin' a little?"

Harmon clenched his teeth and didn't answer. He hated to admit it, but he *had* been trying to extract some measure of sympathy from this crumb. He was furious at himself. What had happened to the man who had dragged himself from that shallow foxhole and, through a rain of whistling steel, led his platoon to the enemy positions? Where was the big hero who'd come home from Korea with a Silver Star pinned to his blouse above a Purple Heart medal?

Fifteen years had done more than make Frank Harmon fatter and slower. They'd saddled him with responsibilities, and made him cautious. Once, he'd have

jumped. this young punk the moment he stuck his nose in the car, gun or no gun. But now there were Janet, his wife, and Margaret and little Frank as well. Dead, he'd be no use to them. Well, right now it appeared that's the way he'd end up this fine autumn night—dead.

He held no illusions that no matter how much he begged, this gunman was going to let him live. Soon they'd be out in the open countryside, and the killer wouldn't need him any longer. But he *would* need an automobile, and he wouldn't hesitate to murder again to get one.

The gun the young hoodlum held—that's what gave him the advantage. The great "equalizer" someone had once dubbed it. Harmon recalled when he'd first handled an Army .45 caliber pistol. That had been back at Fort Bragg, more years ago than he cared to remember. What was it the range officer had said? Oh yes! "This is the best friend you'll have where you're going," he'd told them. "Get to know it, respect it and trust it, and it'll never let you down."

Harmon wondered if his kidnapper had learned as much about the pistol as he had. He sincerely hoped not, for he was going to have to take it away from him,

one way or another, or he'd die. Ahead, the highway narrowed to two lanes and ran straight between scattered farms and patches of dark woods. A huge harvest moon hung in the sky, throwing its yellow glow on the peaceful landscape below.

Harmon flipped his lights to the upper beam, flooding the black ribbon of asphalt for a quarter of a mile in front of the speeding car. A traffic sign warned they were approaching a road junction—a secondary road coming in from the right.

"Slow down and turn right," his companion ordered.

This was it! Harmon pushed lightly on the brake and negotiated the turn. He drove slowly over the potholed surface for a few hundred yards, the palms of his hands sweating.

"Okay, buster, this is far enough. Stop and turn off the lights."

Harmon obeyed, setting the shift lever to PARK, and leaving the engine running. The gunman opened his door and backed from the car. "All right, buster; get out," he said.

Harmon slipped across the seat and swung his feet to the ground. He felt the muzzle of the .45 against his belly.

Now! In a split second he had his big arms around the gunman's

slender waist, hugging with all his strength, and pinning the pistol and his opponent's right hand between their straining bodies. The smaller man's free hand was clawing at his face, but Harmon kept an unrelenting pressure on the gun.

In the bright moonlight he could see the look of desperation and astonishment on his adversary's pale face. He knew the man was trying to pull the trigger, but the pistol refused to fire. Finally, abandoning his efforts, the killer let go and worked his right hand free. In another second both of his hands were at Harmon's throat.

This was the move Harmon had been hoping for. Suddenly he released his vise-like grip, stepped away, and the gun clattered to the hard pavement between them. Disarmed, the young hoodlum was no match for the bigger man. Harmon sent him tumbling backward, then reached down and scooped up the fallen weapon.

He pointed the pistol at the figure at his feet. "Now it's my turn," he shouted. "Get up, or I'll shoot you where you are."

The killer propped himself up on his elbows. "Not with that gun, you won't, buster."

"You think not?" Harmon squeezed the trigger. The night

was filled with a deafening roar, and a bullet plowed into the dirt scant inches from the man on the ground. Frightened, he scrambled to his feet.

"H-how'd—" he stammered, "how'd you do it?"

"Never mind. You're not going to live long enough to have any use for the information."

Harmon realized he couldn't drive the car and keep his man covered at the same time. "Get going," he said. "Back down the road the way we came."

Herding his prisoner ahead of him, he started back toward the intersection. He'd noticed a darkened farmhouse nearby, and where there was a house there'd be a telephone.

He felt pretty pleased with himself as he strode through the night. He'd taken a chance, but he'd won, thanks to an almost forgotten lesson he'd learned about the pistol a long time ago.

It was fortunate he'd remembered that when the slide mechanism of a cocked .45 is shoved backward a fraction of an inch and held there, the weapon is, in effect, half-cocked, and won't fire. He mustn't forget to show Frank Jr. how this worked someday. That would be quite a while from now, when the boy got a little older, of course.

*Take a lesson from nature, it is said, and it would seem that woman has learned something from the chameleon.*

# DYEING for MONEY

by  
Carroll Mayers



I SAW THE brunette before Blackie did. That was a switch in itself, because usually he tabbed all the cute chicks first. In the five-odd months since our association, he'd exhibited a sort of built-in radar when it came to sensing the approach of perky pulchritude.

Whatever, this afternoon was my turn. After a light lunch ('light' because our joint bankroll was rap-

idly nearing zero following a precipitate departure from a neighboring commonwealth where we'd conducted a lucrative enterprise selling and collecting down payments on storm windows without benefit of factory, but where our clientele suddenly began complaining to local Chambers of Commerce) we were letting the digestive juices take over while we re-

laxed in the lobby of the Manor House, Ocean Heights' finest—and only—hostelry.

Blackie was absorbed in a newspaper follow-up concerning a wanted bank heister being found dead from a coronary in a cheap hotel room upstate several days ago, citing aloud some of the details for my benefit. Admittedly, the account had some intriguing aspects, such as the gunman registering, and being without apparent funds, with a redhaired 'mystery woman' as an associate, and then disappearing.

I wasn't, though, paying too much attention, and when the brunette suddenly entered the lobby I paid even less. "Mmmm . . . *mmmh!*" I murmured.

Blackie didn't look up from his paper. "Eh?"

I chose not to enlighten him immediately, concentrating on the girl's fluid rhythm that made me yearn for my lost youth. Finally, I said, "Looks like the Keep America Beautiful program is filtering down here."

"Huh?"

I nodded toward the desk where the brunette had set down her luggage, a single suitcase and shoulder-strap handbag, and was registering. "You're slipping," I told Blackie. "A doll like that, you're usually sparking at twenty paces."

He followed my gaze, newspaper abruptly forgotten. "I must be," he admitted with a grin, eyes appreciatively tracing svelte lines. "But I'll make up for it." He smoothed back his dark hair, started to get out of his chair.

I checked him. "Down, Prince," I said. "I saw her first."

He shook his head, his grin holding as he told me, "Sure, Lou, but admit it—she's out of your league."

I could have taken offense, but I didn't because, at heart, I knew Blackie was right. When it came to dames, particularly the slick dolls, I never did so well. Blackie, on the other hand, could have such a gal wide-eyed and believing every phony word within minutes. But I hung on. "They hit home runs in the minors too," I reminded him.

"And strike out," Blackie needed.

I manufactured a grin of my own. "But they still swing," I countered, and started to get up. Then I slumped back as I saw I wasn't going to bat at the moment. Her registration completed, the girl, lovely long legs scissoring delightfully, was following the bellboy into the single asthmatic elevator, the wheezing machinations of which were akin to those of the vintage car we'd picked up for transportation.

Blackie chuckled. "See?" he said. "You've got to move fast, pal."

I sighed. There would be another time, of course, but I'd likely fan then too, as Blackie had intimated. "All right," I conceded, "it's no contest." I picked up a bit of consolation as I added, "At that, I don't see what you'll suggest in the way of diversion. A town like this, they're probably still showing a Jimmy Cagney gangster picture at the movie house."

"I'll think of something," he assured me:

Undoubtedly he would have, given half a chance to crank up his charm; but once that luscious creature was escorted to her room, she didn't appear again.

Blackie stood it for another two days, then initiated a query. "The young lady who registered Tuesday afternoon, the attractive brunette," he remarked casually to the venerable keeper of the keys as we checked in after a riotous evening of debauchery at the bowling emporium, "I, ah, haven't seen her around."

"No, sir," the old gent agreed soberly. "Miss Brown keeps to her room."

"Miss Brown?"

"Yes, sir."

"She isn't feeling well?"

"It isn't that. She's just resting. Has all her meals sent up."

Blackie considered the information. "Seems a shame to miss all these sunny days on the beach," he suggested.

The old man wasn't about to be drawn into any extended discussion of the routine of one of his guests. "Yes, sir," he agreed simply and suddenly discovered some records that had to be reviewed.

Blackie didn't press the point, but up in our room it became evident he still was bugged. "I just don't get it, Lou," he said.

Scanning a cultural girly magazine, I gave him only half an ear. "Get what?"

"That girl: Miss Brown." He phrased the name with sarcasm.

I shrugged. "It could have been Smith."

He hunched forward. "That's just the point. A hundred to one it's a phony."

I put down the magazine. "So her real name's Rumpelstiltskin, it's still nothing to us. All we have to be concerned with is laying low here until the heat dies down and we can go back into action."

Blackie wasn't dissuaded. "I still want to know her angle," he said. "A girl—a real looker—just doesn't come to a small-town resort like this and hole up in her room without a reason."

"You heard Father Time. She's resting."

"You know that's for the birds."

I went back to my magazine. "It probably is," I admitted, "but I'm not going to lose any sleep over it."

He grunted, stretched out on the bed, began tracing the cracks in the ceiling. Maybe ten minutes passed. Abruptly, Blackie jerked erect. "That's it!"

I'd come to the center fold and hated to be distracted, but the certainty of his mien intrigued me. I sighed, put down the magazine again. "You've solved the mystery of the lovely Miss Brown?"

He nodded tightly. "I'm betting I have. Lou, there's only one reason for a girl like that to show up here suddenly with hardly any luggage, and go into total seclusion. She must've decamped from somewhere in a grand rush and she's still sweating out the caper."

I could buy that. "Like us," I suggested mildly.

Blackie demurred. "Not exactly," he said. "This girl's afraid. She's holed up—really holed up—because she's afraid of bodily harm."

I looked at him closely; he was truly intent, excited. "And?"

"Remember that newspaper item the other day about the dead bank heister and the 'mystery woman'?" He began pacing the room. "Suppose he and that girl were part of a gang that had just scored for a

big bundle, and the two of them decided to double-cross the others and skip with the cash."

I considered the theory. In my grade-school days, recess had been my best subject; I'd never fractured the faculty with a lofty IQ. Still, I thought I followed Blackie's thinking. "Then, when the guy had that heart attack, his lady friend took off by herself with the loot. In other words, it's the same girl, still hiding out."

"Exactly." He stopped treading the carpeting, confident.

I shook my head as one variance suddenly registered. "The paper said she was a redhead, not a brunette—" I broke off, chagrined I hadn't considered a dye job. "It's wild," I told Blackie lamely. "A real long shot."

"Sure it is," he granted, "but it *could* be. That doll could be our 'mystery gal'—with enough hard cash to keep us from worrying over another mark for a month of Sundays."

"You mean, we . . . appropriate the dough?"

"Nothing less, if I'm right. We'll let her have her beauty rest tonight, and hit her after breakfast."

Blackie's theory could be dead-center, of course. The idea of relieving one solitary dame, however luscious, of some ill-gotten gains didn't disturb my conscience so

much. I was a mite concerned, though, over another likelihood.

"That double-cross angle," I reminded Blackie. "If you're right, some violent characters—even gunsels if it was a Syndicate gang—could be trying to run down Miss America. If we mix in, they'll be after *us*. We could be coffin candidates the minute we grab that money."

He still remained cocky. "They won't find us," he countered.

The only fairly certain fruition to that assertion of which I could conceive was an immediate departure from the country via speedy jet, but Blackie had a 'thing', a true phobia against aircraft.

"You'd fly this time?" I wondered.

"No, and we won't be highballing across a dozen states by train or car either," he told me. "There's a small motel, the Shady Rest, just two, three miles outside town. With a real stake, we can sit tight there for months." He gave me a tight grin. "Nobody on the girl's trail, or ours, would suspect we'd skip only that far. It'll be a sort of 'Purloined Letter' bit."

His literary allusion probably was one of only two or three I could recognize; at that, I was flattered he imagined I would. I had to admit it seemed a clever ploy. Still, I couldn't down an overall misgiv-

ing about the whole caper. "All right, if you say so," I said. "But I'm not too happy about it. When we do 'hit' the chick, no real muscle, eh?"

He gave me cryptic assurance. "That won't be necessary. Now, let's hit the sack."

I didn't expect to knock off eight hours of solid slumber (the impending confrontation with the girl and Blackie's unspecified tactics left me jittery) and I didn't. In the morning, though, I began to feel a bit easier. Blackie's hunch was very likely correct; we'd pick up maybe a small fortune with no sweat—and he wouldn't really hurt the girl.

We'd casually ascertained her room number from Father Time, waited until nine-thirty, then approached and rapped lightly.

A moment later she cracked the door, held by the safety chain. "Yes?"

Blackie had left his jacket in our room and rolled up his sleeves. I kept to one side, beyond her vision. Blackie said, "Telephone service, ma'am."

"But I didn't call . . ."

"There's some trouble, ma'am. The switchboard keeps getting your signal."

She hesitated, then slipped the chain. Blackie shouldered inside, and I was right on his heels, slap-



ping the door shut behind me fast.

The girl fell back, bosom lifting and knuckles bruising her lips as she recognized the ruse. She was a looker, all right, with hazel eyes deep enough to drown in and textured skin smooth as a baby's. She wore a simple blue skirt and white blouse outfit. "W-what do you want?" she managed.

Blackie flashed her his confident grin. "The money, honey."

"Money?"

"That's right," Blackie said easily, giving no sign of physical intent. "We don't know exactly how much, but we'll be glad to count it ourselves." He added simply, "I wouldn't recommend screaming."

She moistened her lips, continuing to regard us uncertainly. Blackie's pose of passivity was half reassuring, but his implied threat patently disquieted her. Finally, she ventured, "I . . . don't know what you're talking about."

Blackie shook his head. "But you do. Precisely." As he spoke, he withdrew from his trouser pocket a straight-edged razor and deftly flicked it open. "Like I said, vocalizing would be bad," he told the girl, then added to me, "Start looking."

Reassurance of Blackie's non-violence pledge burgeoned as I glimpsed the razor. The mere sight of blood sickened Blackie, and any

surplus thereof left him limp. He customarily shaved with an electric job, toted the straight-edged gizmo mainly for sharpening pencils.

The brunette, of course, couldn't know her smooth features were in no danger of being etched. Still, for all her sudden fright at sight of the wicked-looking instrument, she still tried.

"No," she protested, cringing from Blackie but making no attempt to cry out. "There isn't any money!"

"We'll see."

"You're wrong, whatever you think."

"Snap it up, Lou."

I got busy, and I didn't have to search beyond the girl's single suitcase, open on a chair. Lining the bottom, beneath gossamer hose and unmentionables, was a layer of neatly-bound money packets. There weren't many of them, only five or six, but there didn't have to be; the denominations were mostly hundreds and fifties.

My fingers itched as I riffled the packets. "There must be twenty, twenty-five thousand," I informed Blackie.

He gave me a triumphant I-told-you-so look. "Sorry, beautiful," he said to the girl, "but that's how it goes."

Mindful of the menacing blade, she still didn't scream, but her



lips twitched as she slumped on the bed, returning his gaze.

I tossed the money packets onto the dresser and eyed Blackie. "What do we do with her now?"

He'd been surveying the room; abruptly, he indicated a walk-in clothes closet. "Lock her in there," he decided. "The door's thick enough. I doubt anyone will hear

her even if she yodels her head off."

I frowned. "She might suffocate."

Blackie shook his head. "The jamb's not that snug." Then, as I continued to look dubious, he said, "All right, check it."

I moved into the closet, turned to note the hang and fit of the door, and had the portal slammed in my face. A pulse beat later, the latch zipped home with a decisive *snick*.

That's right: my erstwhile, five-month associate had sprung a neat little double X of his own. Half of twenty or twenty-five grand is nowhere near as entrancing as the whole amount and, either with pre-planning or spur-of-the-moment inspiration, Blackie had eliminated my bite.

I just about blew my stack. I pounded on the door, rattled the knob, shouted my choicest epithets. All, needless to elaborate, to no avail.

Finally, I eased the arteries a bit. I could hear some muted mouthings in the room beyond. That meant, presumably, that Blackie had bound and gagged the brunette before taking off with the money. I stiffened. So the closet wasn't totally soundproof, and I was having no trouble breathing. Air and sound both suggested *space*.

My heart speeded as my fingers probed the door jamb, slowed when I could detect no crevices, then picked up again, furiously, when my eyes adjusted to the darkness and spotted a slit of light. I dropped to my knees and recognized there was a gap between the bottom of the door and the flooring.

I stood up. Blackie had left the key in the lock, and suddenly my temples began to pound as I recalled an old schoolboy trick. Hope surged. If only there might be a sheet of newspaper or wrapping paper as a dust cover on the closet shelf. I felt over the shelf. There was!

I unfolded the sheet and shoved all but a few inches under the closet door, out into the room beyond. Now if only the closet key didn't bounce clear, or wasn't too thick to slide beneath that space when I retracted the paper . . .

I plucked a lead pencil from my pocket. My fingers were slick with perspiration as I jabbed through the keyhole at the closet key, and my breath caught as the key finally worked free and dropped—on the paper? I all but collapsed with relief as I gingerly pulled back the sheet and finally felt the key.

Blackie had bound and gagged the girl, tying her to the bed, spread-eagle fashion, with the

stockings I'd uncovered. When I freed her, she regarded me for a long moment in hostile silence, massaging chafed ankles and wrists.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

Those hazel eyes were sparking. "If I am, it's no thanks to you."

"I'm sorry. I didn't figure on our visit getting so physical."

"You're not too bright; you didn't figure on Razor Boy double-dealing you, either."

Her frank appraisal didn't bolster my ego any, but in essence she was right. "True," I conceded, "but we all make mistakes."

A bit of her hostility waned. "How did you know about the money?"

"A hunch," I said. I told her of Blackie's intuition, adding a query of my own. "You and your friend pulled a switcheroo yourselves, eh?"

She demurred. "It wasn't that. We learned the others weren't going to give us our full shares." She made a brief gesture. "When Al . . . died, I just sort of kept running with the money."

It was heartening to learn that in this conformative age there still were individualists with ethics who would take unorthodox steps to safeguard their own interests. I nodded and said, "Can't say I blame you."

She seemed to appreciate my understanding; her antagonism became still less. "What are you going to do now?" she wanted to know.

It was a good question, but one to which even then I was beginning to formulate an answer. More, it suddenly struck me that perhaps I might include this lovely creature in such formulation. As I've mentioned, I'd never done too well with the slick chicks, but in this case we'd have a common interest.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

She regarded me soberly. "Marcie. Marcie Shaw."

"Well, Marcie," I said, "I'm going to try and recover that money. If you'd care to throw in with me—and we get it—maybe we could have some fun and games together afterward." I gave her a smile. "Incidentally, I'm Lou Cassidy."

Her intent look held for a moment. Then she took a deep breath, a delightful action in itself, and manufactured a small smile of her own. "All right," she told me, "but I don't think too much of our chances. Razor Boy probably will be on a plane in an hour, headed for heaven knows where."

"Nuh-uh," I said. "Blackie won't fly." I elaborated a bit on his pho-

bia, perhaps to reassure myself.

Marcie shrugged. "So he's sky shy; there're still trains, buses. He can cover half the country before we pick up his trail."

That, of course, was true, but an intriguing possibility already was nibbling at the back of my mind. Blackie had always considered my intelligence as somewhat less than encyclopedic. What if he shrewdly went ahead with the very ploy he'd outlined last night?

Marcie couldn't accept the possibility when I expounded briefly. "He'd never head for that motel, not after suggesting it to you," she objected. "He'd know that would be the first place you'd hit."

"But he just might drive there," I countered. "He might figure I'd figure the way you're figuring: that holing up there after he'd broached the idea to me would be so stupid, so obvious that I wouldn't even bother to check."

"It's crazy."

"Sure it's crazy, but it's a start."

Marcie finally gave in. "All right. Do we take off now?"

"We do," I said. "Pack what you'll need, but pack light. I'll meet you in the lobby in fifteen minutes."

In his hasty departure (presumably via a rear exit) Blackie had packed light himself; back in the room I recognized he'd taken only

part of his clothing and accessories. He had, though, taken time to dump those storm window 'contracts' from the briefcase we'd bought to tote them; I knew that briefcase was now the carryall for Marcie's money packets.

I packed my own suitcase and went down to Father Time at the desk. Figuring it would be wise not to add some skip-tracer to the posse of gendarmes already on the lookout for a pair of slick salesmen, I paid both our and 'Miss Brown's tabs. Marcie joined me shortly, bringing along only her shoulder-strap bag.

Before taking a cab, I checked the hotel's parking lot and derived some perverse satisfaction in finding our car gone. Now if my own theory held up . . .

There's a surplus of oddball characters on this planet; our hacker seemingly thought nothing unusual about a couple leaving a hotel and asking to be driven to a motel only three miles away. He didn't even blink when I gave him further instructions. "Don't pull in," I said as I mentioned the Shady Rest. "Just drive on past, not too fast."

Marcie, though, was curious. "Why?"

"I want to try and spot our car," I said.

"And if it's there?"

That was another good question; unfortunately, I didn't have a ready reply. Physical brouhahas and myself were not exactly compatible, and in Blackie's case the muscular odds definitely were in his favor. "I'm not sure," I told Marcie. "We'll see."

I could have forgotten about any deep cerebration. As we approached the motel, I saw it was set down in a sort of gully, and while there were maybe twenty, twenty-five units, all of them—with individual carports attached—were clearly visible from the highway as we cruised by at a moderate pace.

Our vintage crate wasn't on the site.

Marcie recognized the zero I'd scored. "I tried to tell you," she said simply.

I couldn't fault her needling; I'd been out of my skull to suspect Blackie would adhere to our original plan.

"Excuse me," our cabby said. He pulled to the side of the road, braked, then twisted about, eyeing me shrewdly. "It's none of my business, but if you folks're trying to locate somebody at a motel hereabouts, there's another one five miles ahead."

It just could be! Blackie still could be holding to his original strategem, cleverly modified only

slightly. "You're right, friend," I told our jitney jockey. "Your business it's not, but if we hit there's an extra five for you."

Hit we did. Even before we were fully abreast of the Idle Hour Motel, I spotted our car alongside a cottage at the rear of the development.

"Jackpot," I muttered to Marcie, exhilaration tightening my chest. To the cabby I added, "You're five bucks richer. Stop at the office."

Once we swung off the highway, we were out of the line of vision from that rear cottage. As a possible plan began to simmer, I made certain to remain out of vision by requesting a cottage at the front, two units down from the motel's luncheonette.

"Now what?" Marcie inquired, after 'Mr. and Mrs. Chester Jones' had duly occupied their elected shelter. "In case you've any ideas, I don't feel I'm ready for that fun and games bit just yet."

I grinned at her. "First things first," I assured her. "All we do now is wait until hunger pains start gnawing."

She cocked her dark head. "You mean, until Razor Boy decides to eat?"

"Correct. Blackie's a chow hound and it's now almost eleven. He's not likely to pass up a noon

refueling. With him, food is king."

"Suppose he's already eaten?"

"Then he won't show soon, and we'll have to wait until supper." I adjusted the venetian blind, angled a chair beside the window. "With that swimming pool on the other side of the luncheonette, he'll have to come this way."

Marcie showed her comprehension. "And while he's eating we set up a little surprise party?"

"That's the only way I can take him," I said. "Ten to one he won't bother locking his door, but if he does, it looked like a window was open."

She continued to regard me, obviously appraising my limited muscular prowess. "You're the doctor," she told me finally. "I hope you can swing it."

That made two of us. Still, I thought I could, given half a break. The break developed in less than twenty minutes. Blackie suddenly showed, coming down the walk toward the luncheonette, and he was carrying the briefcase. Satisfaction rippled through me. As I'd surmised, Blackie was taking no chances with twenty-odd G's, and was keeping the money constantly at hand. It could well be our window-climbing act wouldn't be necessary, a risky business at best what with inherent observation by neighboring

occupants. It was worth a try.

I shoved back my chair and alerted Marcie. "Curtain time."

She shouldered her bag. "He's coming?"

"I told you, Blackie loves to eat."

We waited until my ex-partner had entered the luncheonette. Then we quietly left our unit and *strolled* to the back of the lot for the benefit of possible onlookers. My heart raced when Blackie's door opened readily. As I'd hoped, since he was keeping the money with him, he hadn't troubled to set the latch.

By now, Marcie was fully enmeshed in the excitement of the impending denouement. "How will you take him?" she wanted to know, breathing faster.

I'd already spotted a pair of heavy ceramic ashtrays on the twin night tables beside the bed. "This should do it," I said, hefting one. "He'll never know what hit him."

After that, it was more waiting, with both of us peering expectantly through the tilted blind. Ten minutes passed. Twenty. Blackie was taking his time, savoring his vitamins.

"He's coming back!"

I verified Marcie's identification. Blackie and briefcase, indeed, were returning.

I positioned Marcie against the wall, behind the door as it would open, set myself beside her. "Not a sound," I warned, getting a firm grip on the ashtray. "One good whack should be all I'll need."

It was. As Blackie entered, tossed the briefcase onto the bed, I stepped silently behind him, swept my equalizer in a looping arc that landed solidly behind his



left ear. Blackie collapsed like a punctured balloon, bye-bye before he nuzzled the carpeting.

Satisfaction rippled stronger; so much for all double-dealing colleagues. I stepped over Blackie's inert form, caught up the briefcase and checked its contents. I'd never seen a lovelier sight; those neat money packets were completely captivating.

"Lou . . ."

"Eh?"

"H-he's not breathing."

Marcie's hushed pronouncement

snapped me out of my fiscal reverie. I dropped the briefcase on the bed and whirled. Marcie had been bending over Blackie; now she suddenly retreated, lips quirked. "He's . . . dead."

My brain locked. No, he couldn't be; I hadn't struck that hard. *Or had I?* Abruptly I fell to my knees beside Blackie, and feverishly felt for a heart beat. From behind me, I caught Marcie's agonized intake of breath.

Then all my numbing fears eased. My noggin knock had been hefty, but not fatal. Blackie *was* breathing, his eyelids twitching. When he rejoined this vale of tears, say in twenty, thirty minutes, his hat wouldn't fit, but that would be all.

"He'll be okay," I assured Marcie, dusting off my knees.

"You—you're sure?"

"Absolutely. Let's get going."

Her gaze continued anxious, uncertain. "All right, if you say so." Almost mechanically, she retrieved the briefcase.

I took the briefcase out of her hands. "I'll take care of that," I said pleasantly. "You understand."

She still was shaken by the near-tragedy. "Of course," she agreed, managing a wan smile as she moved to follow me. "Whatever you say."

Blackie had left the car keys in



the ignition. We stopped only long enough to collect my suitcase from our unit, then got rolling. Marcie began to perk up in the fresh air. "Feeling better?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'm all right now," she said as she relaxed on the seat. "Where are we going?"

I checked my watch. "I figure we can make Capitol City by dark," I said, "and catch a flight to the coast. After that, who cares. Sound okay?"

Marcie nodded again, shifted a bit closer. "Sounds fine," she agreed.

Was I living? You'd better believe it. A neat little windfall, and a luscious brunette to help me spend it in style. What more could a guy ask?

We reached Capitol City on schedule and I abandoned the car in the airport parking area for the authorities to wonder about eventually. A jet for California was departing in fifty minutes. My own anemic wallet couldn't meet the tariff, but Marcie came up with enough spare cash for the tickets without breaking open the briefcase.

So we were all set, until Marcie suddenly clutched my arm as we relaxed in the waiting lounge. "There's Joey!" she gasped.

I looked at her. "Joey who?"

"One of the men Al and I ran

out on!" Marcie cringed behind my shoulder, slumped down on the seat. "Over there, by the newsstand. He's been looking for me, I know. And he'll have a gun!"

Great. That was all we needed: Marcie tabbed by a vengeful ex-associate with lethal artillery. She was near the panic button; I wasn't the epitome of poise myself, but I tried to calm her. "Easy," I said. "If he hasn't spotted you yet, he'll probably move away."

She didn't buy my reassurance. "I can't risk sitting here—" Marcie broke off. "I can hide in the ladies' room." The next instant she was up and headed there full throttle, shoulder bag wildly swinging and bumping several indignant bystanders, lovely legs flashing beneath her short blue skirt.

I couldn't fault her decision; her temporary sanctuary would be off-limits to Joey, and in due course the hood would depart the scene.

As it developed, though, 'due course' was destined for delay, because from the newsstand, pal Joey turned, sauntered over and settled at the far end of the same divan I occupied.

I began stewing, palms slick on the briefcase across my knees. Had the hood spotted Marcie? Covertly, I studied him. He was a sharp-featured character, nattily dressed.

He'd fired a cigarette, sat relaxed, making no move to read the newspaper he'd bought, but centering his attention on the ladies' room doorway directly opposite.

I relaxed myself, comprehension dawning. Joey hadn't tabbed Marcie; his mien would have been much tenser if he had. Rather, the hood was indulging in a universal innocuous masculine pastime until whim or necessity took him elsewhere. He was girl-watching, appreciatively evaluating the endless flow of femininity which entered and departed the premises.

Then I started sweating again. Marcie wouldn't know of Joey's intent observation of her sanctuary. He hadn't seen her before, no, but when she finally emerged she would be under his direct—if unwitting—scrutiny, and he'd surely recognize her.

My mind churned. Somehow, I had to block that recognition. Maybe I could get word to Marcie through the matron. Maybe I could stand up, cut off Joey's view—

Then the hood solved the whole deal by suddenly tucking his paper under his arm, getting to his feet and striding off.

I all but collapsed at the anticlimax. I drew a deep breath, swiped my brow. Close, too blasted close, but a miss is as good as a

mile. I simmered down once more, settling back to enjoy the filly parade myself. It was well worth watching. There came a curvaceous blonde in a form-hugging white ensemble. There went a long-limbed redhead in a full-skirted yellow dress. There came a sultry, pouting brownette wearing a floppy hat and spike heels. All utterly delightful . . .

*A redhead!* Suddenly I was violently ill. My scalp prickled and my fingers shook like palsy as I fumbled with the catch on the briefcase—and saw inside only the twin to the heavy ashtray with which I'd slugged Blackie.

That's right, shrewd Marcie had suckered me, but good. She'd planned the whole caper, anticipating some opportunity when she'd thrown in with me at the hotel, where she'd packed that shoulder-strap bag. Later, at the motel, after I'd kayoed Blackie, she'd feigned panic, first to divert my attention long enough for her to get behind me while I knelt beside Blackie, to quickly transfer the money packets from the briefcase I'd just checked to her bag; and second, to keep me from rechecking the briefcase due to preoccupation over her condition. The snuggling-closer bit in the car had been an extra touch along that line, as had been the ashtray for

weight. Smart, I had to admit.

My head spun as I fitted the pieces. The clincher, I knew, would be in a booth in the ladies' room.

"You sick or something, mister?"

A sharp-eyed urchin who should have been tapping parking meters regarded me quizzically as I slumped on my seat, the 'vantage point' from which I'd permitted Marcie to walk off with the money simply because I hadn't been checking facial details, but had been awaiting the emergence of a brunette in a blue skirt and white blouse and with a shoulder-strap bag, not a redhead in a full-skirted yellow dress. It was, incidentally, the same point where I'd panicked over an innocent girl-watching citizen whom Marcie had inspiredly pointed out as 'Joey', her trailing nemesis . . .

"I'm fine, kid," I lied sourly. "Why don't you go out and play on one of the runways?"

His lip curled. "Smart guy, ain't-cha?"

Whatever I was, 'smart' wasn't

the word. Just to run it out, I got the ladies' room matron to check for me, and in one of the booths she recovered a blue skirt and a white blouse. There had been plenty of room for those money packets in that bag when Marcie had quickly made the transfer because, aside from her spare cash, the only thing she'd stowed into it at the hotel had been a full-skirted yellow dress.

Of course, the matron also came up with the brunette headdress I'd never suspected (a dye job, I'd brilliantly thought, when considering with Blackie how Marcie had switched from a redhead) and which had enabled her to swing her whole ploy.

So that was the end of the fiasco. Blackie never did catch up with me again, but then I never caught up with Marcie (I'm also betting she outran the real Joey, presuming there was one, and his heister compadres). All of which suggests it's not too smart to get involved with a mercenary dame. Even if she flips her wig for you, you could lose . . .



*Admittedly, it's the squeaky wheel which attracts attention; occasionally, it gets greased.*



*by*  
*W. Sherwood Hartman*

**N**ORMALLY, I can take just as much heat as the next guy, but this day had been too much. I'd spent most of the afternoon rubbing linseed oil into the mahogany dashboard of the old '34 Packard I'm restoring and my right arm felt ready to drop off when I decided

to call it quits. I turned off the radio, closed the drawers of my work bench, got a quart of cold beer out of the refrigerator, and went out to the front of the station where I eased my bulk into my web chair and propped my bum leg up on an old soda case.

The sky was sullen with slate-gray clouds in the southwest and an occasional welcome breath of cool air promised a storm that would break the leaden heat. I must have dozed for a while. Then I was awakened by a splash of cold rain on my face. I stretched and looked toward the sky. The clouds were tumbling toward me like a seething caldron of angry surf in slow motion. I winced as I got to my feet and lurched to one side as my leg gave way under me. That leg is enough trouble when the weather's good, but when there's a storm on the way it's sheer agony.

A black '64 sedan pulled up to the gas pumps and I felt a chill run up my spine in spite of the heat. There were two men in the car. The driver appeared to be in his middle thirties and the other guy was just a kid hardly out of his teens, but in all this heat they were both wearing dark business suits. It just didn't fit. I walked toward the car.

"Fill it up with high-test," the driver said. The kid just stared

ahead through the damp windshield.

I went to the rear of the car, opened the gas cap and set the nozzle of the hose to slow fill. Then I noticed that, while the back end of the car was dirty with spattered mud, the license plate was waxy clean. I moved to the front of the car and cleaned the windshield, then I opened the hood to check the oil. It was full, but I ran my finger down the dip-stick to the low mark and showed it to the driver. "You could use a quart," I said.

"Okay, okay, put it in," he said. He was tapping a staccato tattoo against the steering wheel with his fingernails. The kid just kept looking straight ahead, like he was staring into another world.

I went into the garage for the oil, and had just finished putting it into the crankcase when the automatic shutoff on the gas pump clicked and told me the tank was full. I closed the hood, limped to the rear of the car, and topped the tank off manually, then glanced at the counter on the pump as I walked to the side of the car. "That will be six-fifty," I said, just as a slash of lightning crashed into a tree fifty yards down the road. I recoiled from the blast and felt the sting of hot electricity sear into my nostrils, then I saw the sheets of rain and hail tearing across the

meadow toward us. "Quick," I said, without even thinking, "let's get inside! You can't drive in this!"

They were both as stunned as I was by the sudden fury of the storm, and there was fear apparent on both their faces as they hurried after me. I got the overhead doors down as the first smash of hail hit, then they followed me through the garage to my living quarters in the rear. The onslaught of hail was thunderous on the tin roof and conversation was impossible. I opened three beers and handed them each one. We sat at the kitchen table until the hail had passed and there was only the thumping stutter of heavy rain on the roof.

Then the driver, the nervous one, asked, "Do you have a phone here?"

I nodded, "You're welcome to use it for a local call if you like, but I don't allow any long distance calls to be made from here. It gets my books too screwed up."

The deadpan kid's right hand moved like a startled rattlesnake and I suddenly found myself staring into the barrel of a snub-nosed revolver that looked like a cannon. His voice was as lifeless as his face and as ominous as an adder. "Old man," he said, "if we want to make a long distance call, just what do you expect to do about it?"

Under the circumstances, I did-

n't have an answer so I shut up.

The driver cut in and his words were clipped and angry. "Al, you fool, put that thing away! Haven't you done enough today? Do you want us both to wind up in the chair? You're acting like a kill-crazy kid! Now put that gun away before I get mad!"

Al swung the revolver from me toward the driver . . . Then he giggled. It was a high, girlish giggle, and it scared me more than the gun in his hand. "You're gonna get mad, Freddie? Go ahead, get mad! I'd love to see what you're like when you get mad." His voice was like a siren, coaxing, teasing, "Come on Freddie, *get mad!*" His knuckles were white on the grip of the pistol.

I enjoyed not being the center of attention for a moment, but I knew it wouldn't last. Still, I had to admire Freddie's guts.

He took a long sigh and slapped his palm against his forehead in a gesture of complete disgust. "Al, you stupid fool! We're sitting here on a powder keg and you want to fight with me. I know this country. I can get us out of here. Without me, you're a dead duck! Now put that thing away and go cut the phone line."

Al giggled again, but he didn't sound nearly as sure of himself. He slid the gun under his jacket and

turned to me. "Where's the phone, old man?"

That "old man" bit chewed into me. I'm forty-five and even with my bad leg I could have taken either one of them easy, and if it hadn't been for the hardware they were carrying, I think I could have taken both of them together, but I fought to keep from getting mad. I had the feeling it was touch and go as to whether or not I'd be alive when they left here, and I wanted the odds to be as much in my favor as possible, so I took a deep breath and managed to keep the anger out of my voice. "It's on the wall in the

garage," I said. Then I added, "There's a wire cutter hanging on the pegboard with the wrenches." It wasn't that I wanted to be helpful. I just didn't want him rummaging through the drawers of the workbench.

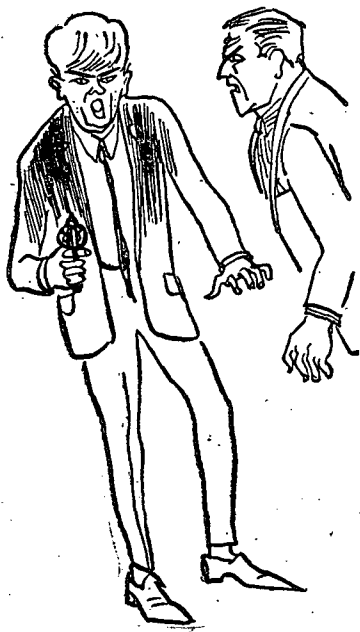
The rain continued slashing against the roof and water was splashing through the screen at the open kitchen door. Al went into the garage to cut the phone wire, then came back into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and helped himself to another beer. "You want another one, Freddie?" he asked. Freddie nodded.

I had the feeling at the moment that my only salvation at this point would be a little agitation, so I grinned at Al and said, "I could use one too."

Al doubled over with a gasping giggle. Then he straightened with an effort and said, "Did you hear that, Freddie? The old man wants one too! Now ain't that a gas? The old man wants another beer! Honest, Freddie, ain't that the funniest yet?"

Freddie was glancing toward the ceiling and his fingers were drumming hurriedly on the table top as he listened to the rain. "Al," he said, and his voice was a patient sigh, "let up on the guy. Let him have his beer."

Al's face went dead and his eyes



took the sheen of a codfish that had been on ice for a week. "You heard what he said, old man." There was no trace of the insane giggle in his voice. "You can have your beer." He smiled and the smile turned me. "Enjoy it, you might never have another one. In fact, you can almost count on never having another one!"

I limped to the refrigerator and opened a beer for myself. Then I took the mop that was propped in the corner and swabbed at the water that had puddled on the floor by the door. There was no letup in the rain. I put the mop back in its place, then sat at the table with my leg stuck out at a stiff angle. "Look, fellows," I said, "I don't know what this is all about, but if it's money you're after, you came to the wrong place. I have eleven dollars in my pocket and there's about eighty-five in the safe. You're welcome to the whole thing. So, if that's what you want, why don't you just take it and leave? I don't want any trouble. I just want to be left alone. Is that too much to ask?"

Freddie squinted his eyelids together, then his frown deepened as he looked at Al. He kept looking at Al the whole time he was talking to me. "Look, we don't need your money. As soon as this rain clears up, we'll be on our way.

Isn't that right, Al? We got plenty don't we? What's the sense of hurting this guy? He don't know where we've been or where we're going. The phone's cut, so he can't call out. Why don't we just let him alone? He can't get in our way."

"He ain't scared, Freddie. Didn't you notice that? He ain't been scared since we got here. He's not scared even a little bit! If a guy's not scared, he's got to have something going for him that we don't know about!" He licked his thin lips with the hungry tongue of a lean wolf. "He's got to go, Freddie! We ain't leaving here with him alive!"

There was a leaden silence in the room as the rain slacked off as suddenly as it had started. Freddie stood up. "Come on, Al," he said. "We have a lot of traveling to do. Let's get out of here."

Al was screaming as he got to his feet, "We're not leaving here with this guy alive! He's not scared, Freddie! I've got to kill him!"

He reached for his gun, and Freddie slapped him with an open hand that drove his head back into the door of the refrigerator. There was a dull thump and Al's knees buckled. He straightened up and Freddie shoved him through the door and into the garage. I followed and opened the overhead



doors. Al walked ahead as they started toward their car. Then he suddenly spun around, and the gun was in his hand. I saw Freddie go down with the first two shots as I put all my strength into a dive that carried me back of a rack of used tires. Four more shots thudded into the rubber, then the motor of the sedan roared and Al was gone.

I crawled out to where Freddie lay on the blacktop, but he'd had it. Both shots had caught him dead center.

I went back into the garage and opened the third drawer under my workbench. I turned on the radio, waited for it to warm up, then picked up the mike and repeated my call letters until I got a response from the State Police Barracks.

"Deputy Anderson here," I re-

ported. "I have one of your bank robbers ready for the morgue. You'll find the other one about seven miles north of my place in the Old Beck Mill Road . . . No, he won't get any farther. I put a quart of linseed oil in the crankcase when they pulled in here. He'll be lucky to get that far before the motor quits . . . Be careful when you close in on him. He's kill crazy. That's all."

I'd spent twenty years on the State Police Force before some punk had put a bullet through my knee and put me out of action. I don't know if the sheriff had deputized me out of pity or not, but I felt pretty good at the moment. I'd been alerted about the bank robbery early in the afternoon and crippled or not, I figured I'd earned my pay for the month.

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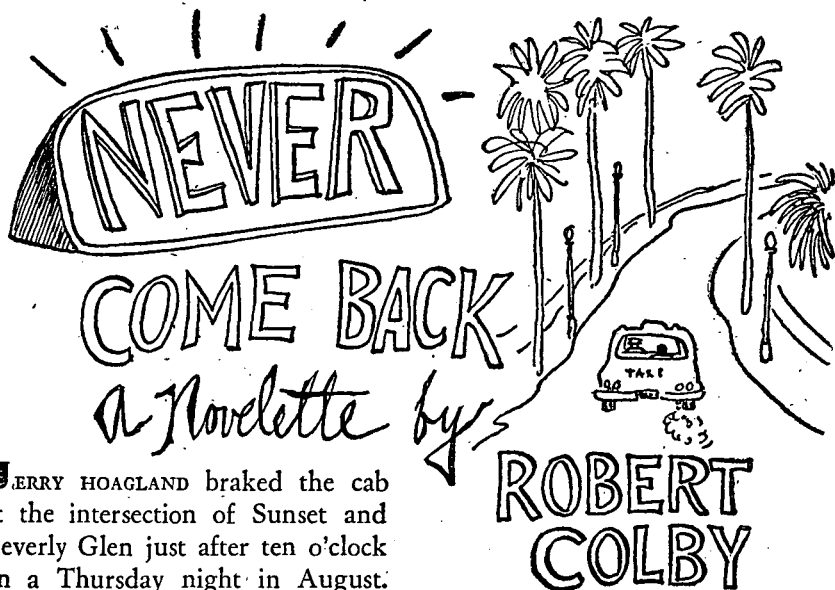
## **IF YOU PLAN TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS**

PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE SO THAT WE WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE THE CHANGE ON OUR LISTS IN TIME TO AVOID SENDING ANOTHER COPY TO THE OLD ADDRESS, THUS CAUSING YOUR COPY TO BE DELAYED AND ALSO COSTING YOU A FORWARDING CHARGE. WHEN YOU NOTIFY US OF YOUR CHANGE OF ADDRESS BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD ADDRESS AND YOUR NEW ADDRESS. FOR YOUR OLD ADDRESS YOU COULD SEND US THE ADDRESS LABEL FROM A RECENT ISSUE WRAPPER CLIPPED TO A CARD OR NOTE BEARING THE NEW ADDRESS. ADDRESS CHANGES RECEIVED PRIOR TO THE 10TH OF THE MONTH WILL INSURE DELIVERY OF THE NEXT ISSUE TO YOUR NEW HOME BY THE 10TH OF THE FOLLOWING MONTH. WRITE TO:

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**2441 BEACH COURT, RIVIERA BEACH, FLORIDA 33404**

*One who is surfeited by his own behavior often tempers his guilt as "heavenly compulsion."*



**J**ERRY HOAGLAND braked the cab at the intersection of Sunset and Beverly Glen just after ten o'clock on a Thursday night in August. There was little action on the radio and all the best cab stands around Beverly Hills and West L.A. were loaded to capacity.

Jerry made a quick decision. He turned off Sunset and wheeled the cab through the east gate to Bel-Air, then made a U-turn and parked on the shadowy apron across the street from the patrol hut.

The stands were identified by number. This one was designated

stand "twenty-seven," but was called over the radio as "two-seven." On a hot day it was a cool, pleasant place to await an order, and business was brisk. At night it was dark and remote and lonely, the calls infrequent. Consequently, after sunset, it was seldom occupied.

Tonight Jerry was grateful to find a spot anywhere. He pushed the yellow hat back off his head,

slouched in the seat and, with half an ear, listened to the spaced monotone of the dispatcher. She had just called a "two-five." That was over in Westwood Village. She sent the driver to pick up a load in front of the Village Theater. It probably wouldn't be much—a short hop which, in the jargon of the business, was a "jerk."

Jerry yawned, lighted a cigarette. His thoughts drifted listlessly, were carried away on dark tides of despair. At thirty-six, fourteen years removed from college and his first wide-eyed job in the office of an aircraft manufacturing company, he was broke. This, though eight months and a hundred years ago he had been advertising manager for the last of the long string of companies he had exhausted.

Exhausted, also, were the two wives who had divorced him. He had not been able to hold them

much longer than his jobs. Gone was a comfortable house with all its furnishings, and a late-model car. Pawned was a three-hundred-dollar watch given to him by his first wife, and a variety of other expensive items acquired over the years.

His personal exhaustion of spirit was total. He was in the last stages of disenchantment, that state of mind which, more than giving up, is too indifferent to care. With his spirit on crutches, he could still drive a cab to oblivion.

By the time he was willing to admit that he should see an analyst, he couldn't afford one. He had to wait his turn at a free clinic. The analyst had told him he should not be ashamed of his gambling habit, even though it had pulled down the whole structure of his life. It was a sickness of the mind and should be treated



precisely like any other sickness.

The analyst, stout and slovenly, needed a shave, his ill-fitting suit was rumped; his teeth, behind thick, moist lips, were tobacco stained, and he had spoken with a weary, pompous detachment.

"No . . . No, my friend, you do not want to win when you gamble. You only imagine that this is so. It is a form of self-deception. What man could admit, even to himself, that he gambles to lose? The fact remains that you do want to lose, to punish yourself for some hidden guilt which we must find.

"If you *really* wanted to win, my friend, experience would have taught you that to win at gambling over any protracted period of time is a childishly impossible dream. You would then have given it up, along with the pain of losing, which you cherish.

"Can I prove that you are a compulsive loser? Certainly! You made frequent trips to Las Vegas. You were a consistent loser. Then one night you won a large amount of money, six thousand dollars. You decided you would quit and go home with this money, but when you went to your hotel room, you could not sleep. Some deep anxiety made you toss and turn fitfully.

"In your own words, 'All that money was burning a hole in my

pocket.' So you got up and you went back to the tables and you lost, down to the last dollar. Then what did you do? You fell into bed and you slept like a baby! Properly punished, satisfied, guilt suspended, you slept.

"The drinking? Try to control it, but don't worry too much about it. You are not an alcoholic. Drinking is the effect, not the cause of your trouble. You gamble and you lose. Not just money. Wife, home, job—everything. Then you feel sorry for yourself, so you drink, and for a little while you are a grand, misunderstood fellow who is just unlucky, that's all.

"Come back and see me, Hoagland. In time, perhaps I will be able to show you that you lost nothing in your whole life that you did not *want* to lose, and I am not speaking exclusively of money. Gambling, drinking are only the obvious paths to self-destruction. If they did not exist, you would have found another way, believe me."

Jerry had not returned to see the analyst. It was difficult to get an appointment; besides, he was irritated by the analyst's condescension, his cocksure conclusions. Jerry had heard all that stuff before about compulsive losers. The analyst had only stacked one oversimplification on top of another,

and you could not argue with him. He knew it all.

He had not listened when Jerry told him that winning, or losing, was incidental. What he did want, what he *had* to have, was the action, the excitement. In a creeping world of unthinkable dullness he was compelled by the risk, the heart-racing jeopardy of putting all that he had on the line.

What did it matter? The whole thing was now ridiculous. The problem was purely academic. At this point in his life he did not need an analyst to tell him that he had nothing to risk and, therefore, nothing to lose. This was the end of the line.

That was the way Mel Wetzler, chubby comic of the West L.A. garage, had put it one payday to a small audience in front of the cashier's window. "Man," he had needed, "this is the end of the line. You guys really screwed up. This is where they send you when you flunk out. All the goof-ups get from six months to life in this joint.

"The judge wears a yellow robe, whatever you call them things, and a yellow hat, and he says, 'Wetzler, for the crime of failing to make it in the kosher pickle business and six other equally responsible jobs, I sentence you to be confined for life behind the

steering wheel of a yellow cab.'

"Confess, you guys! Where did you goof up?"

They had laughed without really laughing and smiled without really smiling, and Jerry had seen the pain in their eyes.

He flipped his cigarette out the window and reached for the brake release. Nothing doing here, time to move on.

At that moment the dispatcher called his stand number. "Two-seven," she said. "Anyone on two-seven?"

Jerry grabbed the microphone and quickly spoke his call letters. You had to be fast. Otherwise some hungry driver cruising about or idling on another stand would try to "guzzle" the order by pretending he was at your location. Then you would have to convince the dispatcher that he was a miserable liar, or race him for the load.

"K-four-six on two-seven," Jerry barked.

"K-four-six," the dispatcher droned, "get the Bel-Air Hotel, in the lobby."

"K-four-six, check!" Jerry said. "What name on that one?"

"No name. See the doorman."

"Check," he answered. Under the dome light he wrote on the trip sheet the time and destination. Then he pulled the headlight switch and swung around, gun-

ning north into the summer darkness shrouding the fabled mansions of Bel-Air; where movie stars, producers, and their satellites, plus the ordinary rich, dwelt in cloistered splendor.

It was a good order, the Bel-Air Hotel, a kind of oasis in that suburban desert, with no city life for miles. The moneyed people who stayed there usually had a long way to go. At all hours, a large percentage went to the airport, a six-dollar ride, a dollar or more tip.

Calculating these possible benefits, Jerry was annoyed with himself. How quickly and cheaply he had sold himself out, adjusting the scale of his sights from the twenty-thousand-a-year executive to the shabby target of the cab driver—fifty percent of meter and tips.

Yet there was now, for him, nothing left out there in the wilderness of Big Business, with his reputation bankrupt, no references on credit. Anyway, there were worse jobs, of the sort which required just enough effort to jog you from the comfortable stupor of absolute indifference.

Too, driving a cab had its moments. That sprawling city was a wheel of chance, a wheel of people; all the crazy-laughing-crying-snarling-scheming-groping-doomed, pa-

thetic people. When they spun the wheel and the ball fell into your slot, adventure waited in the night.

Jerry wound and unwound the cab through the twisting, shadowy complex of embowered roads toward the hotel. Great stone mansions, formal as ancient libraries, low-flung, glassy-eyed ranch houses, and drawling colonials peered from behind trees, hedges, gated walls—winked, and were gone.

The hotel loomed up suddenly. Jerry made the turn, rolled to a halt before the entrance. The doorman glanced at the cab, then phoned the desk.

Shortly, a man dressed expensively, impeccably, in a light gray suit, came down the canopied walk from the hotel. He moved deliberately, as if he'd had one too many and was determined to conceal it. Under one arm he carried a bulging portfolio case, clutching it as if it might take wing and fly.

The doorman made a ceremony of opening the cab door and was ignored for his effort. The man bent inside, fell heavily onto the seat. The doorman expressed his contempt by slamming the door mightily.

Jerry turned, waiting woodenly for the address. Although the signals of manner and facial structure had fooled him once or twice before, he still decided instantly

that he would not like this man with the icy, impatient eyes, and angry mouth.

"Ninety-eight-thirty-three Stone Valley Road," the man said, making it sound like a challenge, leaning forward and waving Jerry on with an imperious gesture. "And, cabby, drive it like a milk wagon, not an ambulance. I don't want a ride to the hospital."

Jerry said nothing. The man was half-stoned, feeling his idiot self-importance; not knowing that he was only a mortal, sinking on the same ship with Jerry to eternity.

Jerry maneuvered the cab to the exit and swung left to begin the climb up Stone Valley Road to ninety-eight-thirty-three, a distance of not more than two miles, he estimated; no city, no airport, and probably no tip. The hell with it.

"You're not much of a talker, are you?" the man said, his words biting, though faintly slurred and vaguely softened by overtones of culture. "I thought you cabbies were *big, big* talkers."

"Depends on inclination," said Jerry, adjusting his mirror to view the man's face.

"Inclination, huh?" The man snorted, worked his jaw. "But you're not *inclined* to talk, mmm?"

"We're not paid to talk," Jerry

answered coolly. "Only to drive."

"Well, I wish I had you on *my* staff. I know how to handle smart boys like you. I'd teach you some manners in a hurry!"

Jerry braked and pulled in sharply to the curb. As he turned toward the man, he found the dome switch and gave it a twist for light.

"Look," he said, "I don't like you either. I won't be your whipping-boy and I won't drool all over you. To me, you're just so many pounds of meat I have to haul at so many cents a mile. You can pay me what's on the meter and then you stumble on up the hill to beddy-bye, or you can ride with me and keep your mouth shut! Take your choice."

The man gaped in astonishment before his jaws sprang together like a steel trap. "I—I'll report you to the president of your company!" he snarled, aiming a finger. "Tomorrow you'll be walking the streets, looking for a job!"

"Fine, I'll make it easy for you," said Jerry evenly. "I'll give you my name and cab number."

The man leaned forward until they were inches apart, the whiskey scent heavy on his breath. "Who do you think you are?" he growled. "Why you two-bit flunky, I can buy and sell your kind by the carload. Don't give *me* ultima-

tums. I'd like to see you put me out of this cab!"

Swiftly, Jerry got out and swung the rear door open. "Try me," he said softly. "Just try me." Tall, wide-shouldered, thickly muscled, he stood poised, glaring at the man.

"Take me home," his passenger said meekly. "Please take me home. I'm just a little drunk. Too drunk to walk."

"Okay," Jerry said. "I remember a few times when I was just a bit too drunk myself."

It was typical of him that, having won in any contest, he always felt just a little sorry for the other guy. They rode the rest of the way without exchanging a word.

The house was dark, a great jewel without prism in a setting of languid palms. Even without brilliance, it whispered of money beyond comprehension to all but the chosen. Of stone, glass, and wood, it hugged the crest of a hill, atop a steep drive between precisely manicured hedges.

The man climbed out awkwardly. Without looking at Jerry, he reached in the window and let a bill fall to the seat. It was a ten. The meter had clocked a dollar twenty. Jerry fumbled for change but when he looked up the man was drooping at the front door, then vanished inside.

Jerry smiled. "We all have our little surprises, don't we?" he mumbled. Then he threw the flag up and sent the cab grinding back down the long drive to the road.

He had driven less than a half mile when he was teased by some missing element linked to the man's appearance as he entered the house. In the projection room of his memory, he replayed the scene in slow motion and solved the riddle at once.

When he found the portfolio case resting on the floor in back, he pulled off the road to examine it. Fingering its soft, rich leather, he held the case unopened on his lap, enjoying the delay, the churning joy of speculation.

Since the man had clutched the case as if its loss might be at least a small disaster, it might very well contain the complete answer to all of Jerry's problems.

That was, of course, a wicked thought, and he was not, by nature, a very wicked person. Yet, under certain circumstances, when pushed to the limit . . .

There was the time, one of many, though this was the granddaddy, when he was borrowed up to here and gone. Furniture loans, auto loans, house loans; personal loans, one and two signature; salary advances, loans out of the pockets of friends, all were at satu-



ration. Still, he'd had to feed the insatiable maw of the gambler, so he had written checks until you could hear them bouncing all over town, collecting in a great pile of rubber on the desk of the district attorney. He might have gone to prison but for the last-minute grace of his father, who had gathered the money from half a dozen sources in an agony of sacrifice.

What would he do, Jerry mused, if he found the case overflowing with the green blood of a new life? He could return the money in the feeble hope of a substantial reward; or he could deny having found the case, playing it cool, insisting that if the case really had been left in his cab, some other passenger of the night had discovered and made off with it.

In the end, searching his character for the rock bottom of truth, he concluded that while he was certainly not a thief in the literal sense, it came down to this: Could he get away with it?

He turned the edge of the case toward him and gave the zipper a decisive opening yank. He held the case under the light.

There was nothing but papers, sheets and sheets of clipped, type-written papers. He glanced at them briefly, inattentively—something about the proposed merger of two corporations, on and on and on in

a legal maze of stilted boredom.

Jerry sighed unhappily. For a minute he had seen that golden door opening. Well, to the man, those papers were important. Another ten bucks? He shrugged. It was worth a try.

He was a bit startled to find the house still cloaked in darkness. Maybe the guy couldn't even make it to his bedroom. Maybe he had collapsed on a sofa.

Jerry got out, taking the case with him, and moved toward the house. He had taken only a few steps when he heard the muted but unmistakable lash of a gun. He paused in stride, cocking his head. Immediately, the sound was repeated; twice; rapidly.

He stood welded to the spot. The suggestion of death filled the void which now settled around him, smothering him. Far from heroic, he was frightened. Yet, perversely, he was drawn to the house, to the mystery and threat it might contain.

He toed forward, came to a window, crouched to look. He had been wrong, there *was* a light. Invisible from the drive, it beamed narrowly in the distant, back reaches of the house, as if slicing from a partly opened door.

He couldn't think what to do. Get on the radio and tell the dispatcher to send the police? He

might make a fool of himself. Perhaps his over-sensitive imagination had developed pictures of dark drama where there was only a harmless incident, easily explained. It would be better to assume nothing, explore the situation first.

He danced lightly around the side of the house. At the rear, it enclosed a swimming pool. Sliding glass doors opened upon it. A faint radiance escaped from behind the partially draped doors:

He approached the glass and fastened his ear against it, but heard nothing. He moved soundlessly to an undraped section and stood peering into a livingroom. A wedge of light cast itself upon a sofa, a lamp, a chair. Now, in this wedge of light, a figure loomed clearly.

It was a woman, a young woman. Burnished, hemp-blond hair drifted down the soft ivory slope of her bare shoulders. In profile her features appeared to have a fine, gem-clear definition. A pale green sheath embraced the urgent sweep of her slender body. Tensely balanced, transfixed, she stared toward the front of the house.

Jerry followed her gaze to understanding. Beyond that wall of glass you could see the bulky silhouette of the cab, its headlights bursting over the drive.

It was as if he studied some

frantic tableau which described the presence but not the form of a screaming evil. His thoughts churned in search of a plan, then he decided to play dumb and let the pieces fall.

Jerry loped around the house and fingered the bell. As he expected, she was in no big hurry to answer. He rang again. After a crawling, measureless interval, the door opened.

"Yes?" she said. "What—what do you want?" Her voice teetered on the thin edge of hysteria. The expression on her delicate face was like splintered china too hastily cemented, the cracks already showing.

"The gentleman wanted me to bring him this case," Jerry composed. "When I brought him home just now, he told me he had left it at the hotel, so I went back for it. He said the case must be delivered to him, personally."

Her tender, tremulous mouth circled around words that had no sound before she said, "That's—that's all right, driver. I'll take the case to him."

Jerry frowned, made his expression doubtful. "Are you his wife?"

"Well, no," she said. "His wife is in the hospital. I'm an old friend of the family." Her quick smile wept.

"Sorry," said Jerry firmly. "I'm

afraid that won't do. I'll just have to give him the case myself. I'll come in and wait, if you don't mind."

Before she could answer he had swept past her and bulled into the room. A lamp had been turned on, the livingroom was bleakly illuminated. The door at the far end, from which the light had seeped, was closed. To fortify his position, Jerry moved deeper into the room.

"What do you think you're doing!" she cried after him.

It sounded, Jerry decided, like a barely controlled scream. Ignoring her, he sat on the arm of a massive chair.

She closed the front door and scampered toward him, all but running, then paused. "You get out of here!" she hissed. "Now! This minute!"

"You're falling apart," said Jerry. "Frightened little pieces of you are dropping all around me. Try to be calm. I didn't come to murder anyone. I just want to give the man his case."

That stopped her. She was fearfully still. She could have been listening to the ticking of a bomb.

"What do you want?" she half whispered. "What do you *really* want?"

"I told you." He held up the case. "The man said this contains invaluable papers. I intend to see

that they get into his hands, even if I have to sit here all night."

She nodded. "I see. Yes, I see what you mean. You're expecting a—a tip, a reward. Well, if that's all, I can handle it. Would fifty dollars satisfy you? Would that be enough?"

Jerry's eyes roved over her dress. If there were stains, he could not detect them. "Fifty dollars?" he said. "That would be too much. It's a five-dollar errand, ten at the most. I'm surprised that you would offer me fifty dollars for a five-dollar service. And I'll tell you something—it worries me."

Her pretty little jaw dropped. "Why should you be worried? I can afford it. If you couldn't use fifty dollars, you wouldn't be driving a cab."

Jerry pursed his lips. "You have a fine sense of logic," he said, "and you're damn right. I could use fifty bucks, but I think what you're hiding would be worth a hundred times that much. That is, if I were the kind of guy who would demand it."

She crossed to a table where she searched in an out-sized purse for cigarettes, paused in the act of lighting one. "What are you trying to say?" she asked, her green eyes narrowing. "What on earth are you driving at?" She lighted the cigarette with a quivering hand.

"Ahh, come on now," he answered. "Let's end this charade. Let's turn over the cards. You see, I heard the shots."

Shuddering, she collapsed into a chair, began to cry softly, covering her face. "It—it was an accident," she moaned.

"A three-shot accident? No, I don't buy that. I suppose it's silly for me to ask—but he's dead, isn't he?"

Her head dipped lower, she rocked in her chair. He waited until she sat up, wiping tears with the crook of a dainty finger.

"It would help if I knew who we're talking about," he said. "What's this man's name?"

"Vandergrift," she said weakly, eyes lifting to that sealed door. "Floyd Wilson Vandergrift."

"Doesn't ring a bell. What did he do to get all this?"

"Nothing," she said bitterly. "He played, he had fun, the way Roman emperors had fun—usually at the expense of other people. His father left Floyd forty millions. Since then, the hardest thing Floyd ever did was to approve big deals and sign a few legal documents."

"He was an incurable lecher and a sadist. He was a truly horrible man."

Jerry nodded. "I can believe that. I spent a few minutes with

him. It was enough. I got the message." Jerry stood, moved away.

"Where are you going?"

He looked back over his shoulder. "Is that the room?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he went on, opened the door.

It was a paneled den, handsomely furnished. A lamp and table had been knocked to the floor. Still burning, shade bent and twisted, the lamp spilled light across the rug and over the body of Floyd Vandergrift.

He had been shot in the neck and chest. His white shirt and gray suit were splashed with crimson. His last expression was one of astonishment, almost as if he hadn't known that his forty millions could not buy immortality.

Jerry leaned against a desk, gulping air, then staggered out.

For nearly a minute they sat in silence. She appeared deceptively soft and frail for a man-killer. Where was the savage feline who had blasted Vandergrift from life?

"Why did you do it?" he asked her.

"Because—because he was strangling me. He had me down across his desk with his hands around my throat. I knew he kept a gun in the top drawer, so I reached over and got it. He was so intent on strangling me, he didn't notice. When I felt myself going, I shot



him." She gently felt her neck.

"Three times?"

"It could have been three times or twenty. I was in such a state, I hardly remember pulling the trig-

ger. I barely heard the noise."

"How did you happen to be in his house?"

"He—he brought me here earlier. We were talking, arguing, real-

ly. He was already a little tight. He got a call, something about a business deal, and told me to wait, said he wouldn't be long. Then he drove off."

"In his own car?"

"Yes, but when he had too much to drink he often left his car and took a taxi. Anyway, I sat in the den, reading. When he returned, he—he tried to make love to me. I resisted him. It's a very long story, but I used to be—involved with him.

"He was going to divorce his wife and marry me, if she didn't die first—so he said. He wasn't all black; he had charm and magnetism, and yes, money to burn. I thought I was in love with him, but while he was gone I—well, I read some letters I found from other women, and I knew he was *never* going to marry me."

"So then you shot him."

"No, no! When I told him I was finished with him, he just laughed and went to a safe hidden behind a panel in the wall. He tossed two stacks of hundred-dollar bills on the desk in front of me, told me to go out and buy some pretty toys and let him know when I needed more. Then, as if he had just bought me, he began pawing me.

"I squirmed away. I said things that even his giant ego couldn't withstand. I threw the money at

him. That was when he attacked me and I shot him."

Jerry shrugged. "I'm pretty sure the cops will believe you, and so will a jury—if you tell it just that way." He climbed out of his chair. "I think it would be best if you made the call yourself. It would look better."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "I can't. I simply can't! Don't you understand? You make it sound cut and dried, purely self-defense, but they won't see it that way. There would be doubts, lots of doubts, headlines in the newspapers, filthy insinuations degrading me."

She began to sob. "And—and until they were good and ready to try me, I'd be locked away in some—some smelly dungeon with the kind of slimy animals they keep in those places. Even if they didn't send me to prison or the gas chamber in the end, I couldn't face that. I—I'd rather die right here and now."

Jerry nodded. "Everything you say is true. If you got off free, it would still be a nightmare, but you did kill the man. While I'm hardly one to play God, can I turn my back and just walk out?"

"Of course you can! Do you think anyone would ever know that you came in here? Suppose they did? Suppose you were seen? You delivered some papers to Mr.

Vandergrift. You saw no one but Floyd Vandergrift. If someone shot him, that was after you left. Who would tell? Certainly I would be the last one to talk."

"You're very convincing," he said, "and being a most attractive woman to boot, you've got a lot going for you. Just the same, I don't think I should—"

"Listen," she said quickly, "how much do you make as a cab driver? A hundred a week?"

"It comes to about that. Why?"

"How would you like to take a year off, with pay?"

"You kidding? Of course I'd like to take a year off. And don't tell me who would provide the

traveling money. Let me guess."

She reached in her purse, crossed the room and extended a packet of bills. As he took it from her hand, her trembling leg brushed against his own electrically, the subtle-sweet perfume of her settled over him.

He riffled the bills with his thumb, green hundreds passing in review. They carried him to a golden swath of beach where he lay supine beneath a lazy summer sun. They flew him to Las Vegas where he spread them across the green felt of the gaming-tables and watched them multiply. Their magic carpet sent him to Santa Anita where his own swelling shout rose above the crowd-voice as the horses thundered across the finish line . . .

"Five thousand," she said. "It's yours, and it demands nothing from you—but silence."

He looked up at her. "You might not have needed this," he said, "but it helps." He stuffed the money into his pocket. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

She went away, turned. "That's the gamble you take . . . And why do you smile? Is it so funny?"

"Not unless you knew me better. Okay, let's move! What did you do with the gun?"



"It's right here in my purse."

"Fingerprints?"

"I don't think—"

"You have to know! Take this handkerchief and wipe anything you might have touched. And where are the servants? He must have servants."

"He let them off until Monday. He planned to visit his wife at the clinic, was supposed to fly there this morning but he delayed another day."

"Good. It'll be a while before they find the body. Now get to work on those prints!"

She raced about, dusting furiously, disappearing behind the door of the den. When she returned, he wiped the portfolio case and left it on a table.

"Does anyone know you were coming here?" he asked.

"Not a soul."

"Would Vandergrift have told anyone?"

"Not a chance. In public he was a self-righteous hypocrite. He was afraid his wife would catch him and take his money. He's been waiting for her to die, rooting for the end."

"You still might be a suspect."

"Perhaps, but just one of many. I told you that he—"

"Skip it. Let's go, let's go!"

As they were leaving, having turned out the lights, she kissed

him suddenly, lingering over it, caressing his back with pulsing fingertips. At any other time, with such a woman, he might have fallen into a fatal spin.

"You're a very sweet guy," she murmured. "How can I ever—"

He covered her lips, then ducked out the door to douse the lights of the cab before she got in. "Keep down in back," he warned her. "Out of sight until it's safe."

He slid the cab down the long curve of the drive, relieved because the house sat aloof from its neighbors.

As they neared the east gate exit she sat up, composing herself in a dark corner of the cab. Pausing for a signal, he turned once to look at her. She seemed untouched by evil, was innocence itself, her guilt a fiction, unreal as the bulging thousands in his pocket.

"Where do you live?" he asked her.

"Take me to the Beverly Hilton."

"Is that all I'll ever know about you, the Beverly Hilton?" He gave the flag a downward yank.

"It would be dangerous for you to know anything about me. Forget me. Live your life, be happy."

"Happy? What does it mean? I never learned how to be happy. I used to be excited some of the time. Is that happy? At least give



me a name. Am I asking a lot?"

She hesitated. "Just think of me as Laura. It's a name I always liked."

"Just think of me as Jerry," he said. "It's the name I've always had."

They rode then in silence. He was engulfed by depression, even as he used to be after a frenzied spell of gambling. The night had been a discordant music, off-beat, wild, macabre—but unfinished.

"Good-bye, Jerry," she said at the Hilton door. "I won't say 'thanks.' It's such a tiny word."

"Your gratitude is in my pocket," he answered. "Now you're on your own. Be careful—'Laura'."

Then she was gone, swallowed behind the glass doors of the hotel lobby.

He circled, counting the cabs nudging each other on the hotel stand set in darkness fifty yards from the entrance. There were three, the limit was four. He took the last spot; set the brake and reduced to parking lights. He flamed a cigarette and watched.

The hotel was a dodge, of that he was certain. In time she would have to come out. Someone would be there to pick her up, or she would take another cab. Either way . . .

Mel Wetzler was first up. Jerry could see him leaning against the

front cab, chatting with Dave Conley, a young actor down on his luck. Jerry slumped deeper in his seat. He was in no mood for Wetzler or Conley or any of the others. He was already in flight from their orbit and they would sense his distraction, resenting it.

She came out in twenty minutes. She stood uncertainly at the curb, her eyes darting about, probing the darkness before she turned and spoke to the doorman.

Mel Wetzler sped around and drove her off when the doorman blew his whistle. For an absurd moment, Jerry thought of following; in his own car, yes, but not in the cab. She would catch on quickly enough, even if Wetzler didn't, and there was a better way.

Wetzler was a quarter of an hour late checking into the garage but Jerry stalled, sipping coffee and standing on the fringes of a group heatedly discussing a new contract proposed by the union.

Jerry told Wetzler, "... I had a ten mixed in with the singles I gave that dame when I changed her five. Didn't notice 'til I got on the stand and started counting to see if I made book. Then I saw her get into your cab, figured you'd have the address, and I'd nail her tomorrow night when I came on."

Wetzler got the address from his trip sheet and gave it to Jerry with

a small gem of wisdom: "Even if you don't get the ten back it's worth the trip. Man, that's some looker! A guy like you could make a connection." He winked. "Lemme know how you make out, huh? No kiddin'. Maybe she's got a twin sister."

The address was in shabby, beatnik Venice on the ocean. Jerry was puzzled. Somehow he had expected to find her enthroned in a penthouse atop one of those gleaming towers of the rich at the edge of Beverly Hills or Westwood.

Just before noon of the following day he drove out to Venice in his own tired sedan. Beyond the easy excuse of mere curiosity he could find in himself no clear motive for taking the risk. He knew only that he was compelled to see her again, that really there had never been a choice.

He found the place a few blocks from the POP amusement center off a narrow alley disgraced by broken bottles, swirling papers and moldy garbage. It was a wood-frame, sooty-white duplex. Bay windows gazed out across a corrugated litter of sand to the gray-blue ocean.

A multitude of signs threatened to have him towed away if he dared to park on any of the streets or alleys which divided these ruins; for it was summer and the

public beaches were swollen by the worshipers of sun and sea. Spying a vacant carport, Jerry gambled that its owner was at work and could not return before five.

The lower half of the duplex was empty. A scarred expanse of hardwood floor, barren of furniture, could be seen through salt-smearred glass. Below the stairway to the upper level he paused to glance at the twin mailboxes. There wasn't a name card in either frame.

He mounted the stairs and knuckled the door.

She wore a bathing suit, a bikini of paneled black and gold; flimsy islands of cloth surrounded by a warm sea of pink-white flesh. The blonde silk of her hair had been swept up so that now it crowned her head. Nearly devoid of the night's makeup, she was not less beautiful, but more real. He could see the pale brown star of a freckle branded on her cheek.

She drew a sharp little breath. "You followed me!" she accused. "And I trusted you. Oh, why did you have to come here!"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I suppose it was curiosity."

"Is that so? I think not. Our arrangement was fine last night, but today you're not satisfied. Isn't that it?"

"Do we stand here and make it a public debate—Laura? Or will you invite me in?"

"What would you do if I refused?" Her green eyes narrowed, knifing him.

"I'd find some way to persuade you."

"I see." She turned disgustedly. He went in behind her and closed the door.

It was a small, L-shaped living-room sparsely furnished in bright maple, the splashy colors of cushions and lamp shades hectically gay.

She sat tentatively on the edge of a window seat, hugging herself as if the scanty bathing suit embarrassed her dignity. He sat uncomfortably in a hard maple chair. At least she was angry, and that was positive. Having come without the armor of any special plan or conviction, he was groping in the dark, letting her lead him, toward what?

"More money?" she said, reaching for a cigarette, lighting it. "Last night it was a willing gift, today it's blackmail. How much?"

"Did I ask for money?"

"You didn't have to. You're here, aren't you? Did you come for a swim? Bring your bathing suit?"

"What would you do if I did demand more money?"

"You'd have to give me time to

raise it. I paid some debts this morning. I'm all but broke."

"Well, I didn't come to blackmail you. As a matter of fact, I felt a bit guilty about taking hush-money just because you were in trouble. I went along with you because I believed your story and because I knew that even if a jury believed it too, you were in for a long, rough ride, the kind of public torture that might break a sensitive person."

When she said nothing he paced to a window, turned. "The money was a bonus. I took it on impulse. I thought it might help me patch some old wounds, give me a new start, but when I got to thinking about it, I began to wonder if taking blood-money, so to speak, didn't cheapen my motives."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not a do-gooder. There's damn little of that in me. Right now I'm not sure if I mean this nobility stuff I'm spouting, or if I'm a fake, just rationalizing." He went back and sat down.

"Sure, I need money," he said. "I love money. I'm crazy about the green that buys all my kicks. But let's compromise. I'll share it with you. Since you're nearly broke, we'll spend it together."

For seconds her face was a stone. "Are you real?" she asked. "Because if you are, you must be a

nut. A nice sort of nut, but still a nut. I never met anyone like you. If you wanted blackmail, at least I'd understand you."

She touched his cheek. "Forget your little guilt," she said. "It's just a grain of sand compared to mine. Go out and spend the money. Have a ball, but not with me. There's no room left in me for fun and games. I'm fresh out of the stuff that makes people go. Inside, I'm dead and buried."

"Then we're alike," he said. "They buried me a long time ago. We're just alike."

"No," she said gently, "I don't think so. We're not at all alike."

He reached out and pulled her to him. She offered only a token resistance before he kissed her. Frantically clinging to her as if she might be the last piece of driftwood in an open sea, the stark loneliness of his existence flooded him with sudden terror.

"Maybe," he said, releasing her, "if you hadn't kissed me last night, I wouldn't be here now."

"That was an impulse," she answered. "A kind of thanks. So was this, but it won't happen again. I've got nothing to give you but trouble." She stood and moved away.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Tell me that."

"I'm Laura," she said. "Just Laura, to you."

"Can you blame me for wanting to know more? Don't you put a name on your mailbox?"

She crushed her cigarette in a ceramic tray on the coffee table. "I'm only here a short time in the summer," she said. "I pick my mail up at home."

"Where's home?"

"No comment." She smiled thinly. "Did I ask you to come here?"

"No."

"Then don't ask questions, don't be a detective."

"I'm not afraid to talk about myself."

"That's different. You have nothing to hide. You drive a cab, you're not in any trouble. Why *do* you drive a cab? You don't look like a cab driver, you don't act like one."

"How does a cab driver look? How does he act? Is there a pattern, a mold? College professors drive cabs here in the summer; actors between parts, all types of people. I used to be advertising manager for a big company. Would you believe that?"

"I'd believe it."

"About last night," he said, approaching her. "It happened just the way you told me, didn't it? I mean, you're not really—"

"A murderer? Go ahead and say it. You want to be convinced again,

don't you? You want your picture of me to be only a little soiled, not drenched in the cold blood of an unforgivable crime. In that way your conscience will be clear and you can justify the fact that you allowed me to go free, to escape punishment."

"I think that's true," he said, "and I couldn't have put it better, although it goes deeper. Despite that horrible business of last night, I find myself liking you. I feel drawn to you, and I don't want it to change."

"Don't like me," she said. "Don't be drawn to me. Just leave me and don't ever come back, for your own sake, for mine. If you need a little something to soothe your conscience, I'll give it to you. I'm a lot of things you would despise if you got to know me, but I'm not a murderer. I'm as human as you are. I have feelings, I have compassion. I never meant to hurt anyone. Take that much with you and go. I won't talk about it again."

"The subject is closed," he said happily. "Listen, let's forget the whole thing, together. I'll take the night off, maybe a couple of nights. We'll do the town. This town or some other town, if you like; San Diego, San Francisco. Better yet, make it Las Vegas! Whatta you say?"

She sighed. "You're hopeless. You weren't even listening. You didn't hear a word I said. I don't want to go anywhere, with you or anyone else. I don't even want to forget. You must know a dozen girls. Call one up. Forget with her."

"I work six nights a week," he said. "On the seventh I go to my cell, my twelve-by-twelve room. I think, I read, I fall asleep. I haven't had time for girls, or money. I'm in hock to half the world. That's why I have no girls to call."

"Well, I'm sorry," she said, "but you'll do all right, now that you can afford to have a good time."

"You won't change your mind?"

"I won't change my mind. Please go now."

"Do you need some money?"

"I don't need anything but to be alone!" she cried.

"It's the shock," he told her at the door, "but you'll get over it. Then your mood will change."

Jerry did not take the night off. He decided to wait a couple of weeks. Then, if the police did not so much as glance in his direction, he would resign.

As usual, he checked into the garage at five p.m. He tried to avoid Mel Wetzler, but Wetzler cornered him in the locker room.

"Gonna catch up with that dame tonight, get your sawbuck?" Mel

both grinned and winked hugely.

"I might do that," Jerry said casually. "I need the dough."

"You may not get it," Mel advised. "But like I told you before, it's worth the trip if you can make contact." He winked again.

"She's probably married, has a couple of brats," Jerry replied. "All I want is my dough."

Friday nights were good. Jerry didn't sit dead on a stand for over ten minutes in the first three hours. He had two trips to the airport, took a couple of loads to city hotels, and was hustled over to the Valley.

Just after eight o'clock the dispatcher sent him to a motel on west Pico. Two sailors were waiting there. They were pretty well in the bag and boisterous. They wanted a fast ride to the POP amusement center in Venice.

When he had delivered the sailors, Jerry struggled with temptation for only a minute. Then he swerved into the alley and headed south. It wouldn't hurt just to cruise by the house and take a look. With a few blocks between them was he going to turn tail and run?

From the alley he could see the back of the house. The blinds were sealed but there was soft light behind them to announce her presence.

Nevertheless, he went on, feeling the urge racing his pulse, goading some twisted, bottomless hunger. He was restless. His thoughts bounced off walls of frustration and shattered. The job would no longer come into focus, the night fell apart and left him empty, groping.

He needed a drink. He desperately needed a drink. He drove north on Main Street until a green neon cocktail glass beckoned him. He pulled up in front, removed his yellow hat, and reached into his pocket for the tie he carried habitually. Hatless, wearing a plain dark suit and tie, he felt restored, anonymous. He went inside and sat at the bar.

Jerry ordered a drink and gulped it down. He ordered two more and drank them slowly. He called for another and another, and when they were gone, he knew it didn't matter. He was in the driver's seat—all the way. No pun intended, though it made him chuckle.

Let her scold, let her accuse. Who was *she* to accuse *him*? He left a ten and went out to his cab.

He waited forever at her door. What was the big deal? Why the silly delay? Then she opened the door, wearing a white sweater and a beige skirt. Plain as bullion soup, but she made it regal as cham-

pagne. He tried to remain steady.

"Laura," he said expansively.  
"Laura, baby!"

Her icy stare shriveled him, burst the fragile balloon of his ego.

"I'm not very surprised," she sneered. "I was rather expecting you." She stood aside, he entered.

"What is it this time?" she asked.  
"What do you want?"

What did he want? It was there a moment before but now it had escaped him. She had sent it away, erased it with her relentless eyes, her disdainful manner.

He stood naked. All at once he needed some kind of gimmick to hide behind. "I—I got to thinking about—"

"Again?"

"Yes." He laughed idiotically. "The money. I can't accept it," he lied. "I want to give it back." Now he was trapped, but later he would squirm off the hook.

"That's great," she said. "I'm thrilled. Let's have it then."

"Well, I didn't bring it with me. I wasn't sure, you know. But I could get it in an hour."

"Do that," she said. "Run, Fido, fetch me the money."

"That's no way to talk to me! C'mon, loosen up. Come with me. We'll stop for a drink. You gonna stay here alone, crying for that devil?"

"What makes you think she's

going to be alone anywhere?"

In unison, they turned toward the voice.

He stood framed in a doorway which opened off the livingroom. He had tar-black hair and a swarthy complexion. His pretty Latin features and obsidian eyes were vacant as unfurnished rooms.

Jerry saw the pistol extended toward him in such a way that he knew the man intended to kill him. A vast stillness overwhelmed him, and in that moment of stillness he understood what it was that he had wanted all along. Then the gun exploded, hurling the cruel bee of lead to sting his heart. Mindless as wind, he sagged to the floor.

"Why!" the blonde woman screamed at the man. "Why did you kill him!" she moaned, clutching her head and staring incredulously at the body. "You promised me! You said if he came back you'd only scare him away."

"So, I scared him. Didn't I, Joy? I scared him to death. Listen, he was asking for it, begging for it. I know the type. Nothing could shake him loose. He was only setting you up, getting ready for the big squeeze. Give him a week or two and he would've had the whole fifty grand."

"Oh, how brilliant you are!" Joy said tearfully. "You think like a

con, you act like a con, and that's just what you are at heart, Tony. If—if anything clean and decent and—and beautiful walked right up and shook your hand, you wouldn't recognize it."

She sat limply in a chair, looked up at Tony in amazement. "What happened to me? What madness ever made me want to spend a single minute of my life with you?"

"Money madness, for one," he answered, shoving the gun under his belt and looking down at the body. "I should've killed this guy last night. He was a natural. I might've been able to make it look like Vandergrift came in and caught *him* busting the safe.

"Vandergrift shoots him dead. Yeah—but the cabby isn't alone. His partner shoots Vandergrift and walks out with fifty thousand. Neat, huh?"

She stared at him blankly, not really listening.

"Funny," he said, "you don't think of those things when the pressure's on. It hit me right over the head driving up here tonight, but at the time it sounded to me like you had him skinned and in the bag.

"The way you twisted the truth about how it was between you and Vandergrift, just enough so it fit like a glove— Man, you won the

Oscar for that performance. I figured, why not? Why not let him think *you* shot Vandergrift. It was worth five grand to get rid of him. How did I know you'd lead him here?"

"What does it matter?" she said. "It's finished. We'll get caught now, and I couldn't care less."

"You're outta your head! What makes you think we'll get caught? When everyone's dead in bed, I'll dump him on the beach a couple of miles from here. No connection."

"No connection?" she said. "How do you know that? He was going to take the night off and he was dressed for a night off, so he must have come in his own car. Where is it? What does it look like? We don't know."

"What's the difference? Is this the only house in the block?"

"No, but suppose he told someone he was coming here? Suppose he confided in some friend?"

"You must be stupid, Joy! Really stupid. Why would he tell anyone? Why would he put his own neck in a noose?"

"I don't know," she answered. "He was just that sort of guy, reckless. He didn't seem to care what happened to him. If he did tell anyone, the police will trace him to us. Then they'll find out that you've got a record and that



I was Mrs. Vandergrift's nurse. Could they ask for anything more?"

"Shut up!" he said, turning his head, listening. "Did you hear that?" He crossed swiftly and snapped off the lights, opened the blind and looked down.

"A couple of small-time lovers," he reported. "Punk teenagers trying to find a way in downstairs. They saw the place was empty. But I don't think they heard the shot."

"Leave the lights off," she said. "Nothing is real in the dark. Open the windows wide. I want to hear the ocean. I want to smell it. There's something clean and fresh about the smell of the ocean."

He snorted. "There's nothing clean and fresh around here for miles."

"How true," she said. "Oh, how true."

He hoisted the windows wider and fell into a chair. "I need a drink," he muttered. "That's what I need."

"You don't know anything about needing, Tony," she said. "Oh, why did you do it? I liked him. I—I liked him a lot. Compared to him, you're a monster."

"Shut up!" he growled. "That's enough outta you! He was just another dope. He didn't know when to quit. In my world, they eat his kind for breakfast."

"He was a little crazy," she murmured to the darkness, "and terribly mixed up. But he was a nice guy, a very sweet guy."

"I gotta have a drink," Tony said. "Go make me a drink, will ya, Joy?"



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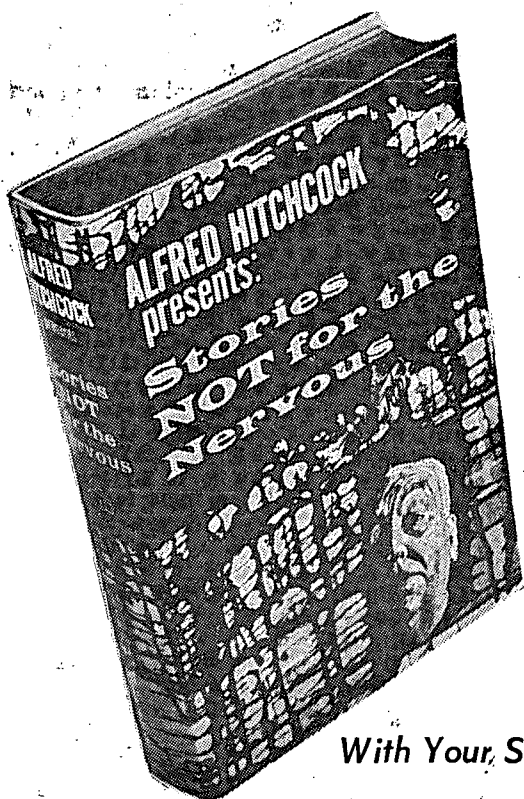
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